

**“Good Luck, and Stay Black”: A History of Blackface at Indiana University**

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## **Abstract**

Numerous politicians from all sides of the spectrum have recently come under fire after searches in scrapbooks and yearbooks have implicated them in wearing blackface, often during their time at university or boarding school. Governor of Alabama Kay Ivey wore blackface during her time at the University of Alabama in the 1960s.<sup>1</sup> While at Eastern Virginia Medical School in 1984, Governor of Virginia Ralph Northam wore blackface while standing next to a man wearing a Ku Klux Klan hood.<sup>2</sup> After a 2001 photo of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in blackface emerged, Trudeau confessed that he was unsure of how many times he had worn brownface/blackface throughout high school and college.<sup>3</sup>

This paper will examine the unique history of blackface at Indiana University through numerous incidents of the use of blackface in student productions, Greek life, and in the surrounding Bloomington community. The paper will focus on the 20th century, from minstrel shows in the early part of the century to a particularly obscene fraternity scavenger hunt that occurred in its final decade.

## **Introduction**

Blackface was first introduced in the United States as early as the nineteenth century in the form of minstrel shows. Minstrel shows are generally defined as musical, comedic performances in which white entertainers cover at least their faces, and potentially more of their body, with "burnt cork or grease-paint" in order to portray themselves as black.<sup>4</sup> Red paint is often used on and around the mouth in order to create exaggerated large lips. Blackface

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<sup>1</sup> "Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey Apologizes For Wearing Blackface During College Skit," NPR.org, accessed October 22, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Caroline Kelly CNN, "Northam Apologizes for 'racist and Offensive' Costume," CNN, accessed October 22, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> "Justin Trudeau Says He Does Not Know How Many Times He's Worn Blackface in His Life - CNN," accessed October 22, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Catherine M. Cole and Tracy C. Davis, "Routes of Blackface," *TDR (1988-)* 57, no. 2 (2013): 7-12.

entertainers could be found in minstrel troupes, or as single performers in a vaudeville act. Blackface did not disappear as minstrel shows fell out of fashion. Instead, the use of blackface "continues to travel through time and space frequently unmoored from knowledge about its antecedents," taking new form in "ghetto parties" where partygoers don blackface and throw up gang signs.<sup>5</sup> This performative blackface may not include the characteristic burnt-cork, but its mockery of black culture and exacerbation of stereotypes is just as harmful. At universities, blackface and other forms of racism continue to emerge through the use of social media. In 2016 a professor at Indiana University's rival Purdue University was criticized, but not fired, for choosing an old photo of herself with a friend, both donning black face and wigs, as her public Facebook profile photo.<sup>6</sup>

At Indiana University, the use of blackface has also evolved. This paper will demonstrate that throughout the twentieth century, the use of blackface changed as it moved from its use in semi-professional minstrel shows, to casual social functions, to underground fraternity hazing. This transformation shows that as blackface has adapted new functions, racism has remained present at Indiana University.

### **Behind Blackface**

The intentions behind blackface and its traditional minstrelsy "have always been flexible and its reception widely divergent."<sup>7</sup> In *Burnt Cork: Traditions and Legacies of Blackface Minstrelsy*, Stephen Johnson noted that blackface, "seemed largely to disappear from television, film, and other mass media from at least the 1960s."<sup>8</sup> There is now a notion of a "resurgence of

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<sup>5</sup> Catherine M. Cole and Tracy C. Davis, "Routes of Blackface."

<sup>6</sup> Colleen Flaherty, "Purdue Will Not Punish Professor Who Shared Blackface Throwback Photo," Inside Higher Ed, July 5, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Johnson, *Burnt Cork: Traditions and Legacies of Blackface Minstrelsy*, University of Massachusetts Press, 2012, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Johnson, *Burnt Cork: Traditions and Legacies of Blackface Minstrelsy*, 2.

blackface in contemporary society" which Johnson argues never did "disappear entirely."<sup>9</sup> The origins of blackface are not clear, with some sources claiming its roots in "evocative folk and and ritual" while others claim "western European traditions of charivari and carnival" or "vibrant, uniquely diverse street culture."<sup>10</sup> In *Love and Theft*, Eric Lott claimed more generally that its origins stem from "a white obsession with black (male) bodies which underlies white racial dread to our own day."<sup>11</sup>

The earliest forms of blackface existed in the minstrel shows, which were "long enveloped in a reactionary nostalgia that desperately needed debunking; partisans of blackface have always longed for the imaginary days of the strumming Sambo."<sup>12</sup> As a whole, it was a form of "cultural robbery" where white people could ridiculously appropriate black culture based upon their own attraction to it.<sup>13</sup> Lott explored the "psychological motives of 'racial' impulses" that "lie so deep in most Caucasians as to feel inevitable and indeed natural."<sup>14</sup> Minstrelsy and the desire to paint oneself come from more emotions than just an urge to portray racial dominance. While blackface exaggerated features, the white actors exaggerated perceived mannerisms, portraying African-Americans as unintelligent and submissive. Lott argued that "underwritten by envy as well as repulsion, sympathetic identification as well as fear, the minstrel show continually transgressed the color line even as it made possible the formation of a self-consciously white working class."<sup>15</sup> Minstrel shows were most popular among that white working class, who perhaps found "the Negro" as a convenient, relieving character to cast blame on for their own misfortunes and challenges. From this, poor whites gained a sense of superiority by placing African-Americans

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 5-6.

<sup>11</sup> Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, Oxford University Press, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 9.

below them in the social hierarchy. Minstrelsy was also most prevalent in the "urban North", despite a tendency to view it as a fixture of the plantation South.<sup>16</sup> Racism and its ugly displays through blackface were not at all confined to the South.

### **Race Relations at Indiana University**

Indiana University has had a complicated relationship with race throughout its two-hundred years. Located in Bloomington, Indiana, the university was the southernmost of the founding Big Ten universities. Southern Indiana was settled mainly from "migrants from the states south of the Mason and Dixon's line" and was "a territory yet not too friendly toward the Negro."<sup>17</sup> During and after the Civil War, many "whites vigorously opposed the influx of free blacks into the state" despite the fact that they "opposed slavery."<sup>18</sup> This twisted legacy is described by Brent Campney in *Hostile Heartland: Racism, Repression, and Resistance in the Midwest*: "It is not surprising that white Indianans would subscribe to the comfortable fiction that they did not perpetrate the kinds of crimes that they were happy to condemn when perpetrated by white southerners."<sup>19</sup> The Ku Klux Klan was a feature of Southern Indiana in particular, from at least the 1920s. In *Some Aspects of Race Relations at Indiana University, My Alma Mater*, Frank Beck recounts, "many men of the community became members, not a few students, and there was reason to believe a number of faculty members."<sup>20</sup> The Klan's influence apparently rose to the point that a president of the university, William Lowe Bryan, appealed to the governor in fear of a

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<sup>16</sup> Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, 3.

<sup>17</sup> Frank Orman Beck, *Some Aspects of Race Relations at Indiana University, My Alma Mater*, 1959, 1.

<sup>18</sup> Brent Campney, *Hostile Heartland: Racism, Repression, and Resistance in the Midwest*, 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Campney, *Hostile Heartland: Racism, Repression, and Resistance in the Midwest*.

<sup>20</sup> Beck, *Some Aspects of Race Relations at Indiana University, My Alma Mater*, 31.

race riot.<sup>21</sup> Finished in 1959, Beck's report did not include any incidents describing blackface or minstrel shows.

Beck's report did include a number of racially-motivated incidents and their resolutions. To summarize his findings, almost all aspects of student life were segregated from the dining room to the student union. However, efforts to integrate and promote racial tolerance on campus began as early as 1935, when an interracial group of students formed "the Commission."<sup>22</sup> The appointment of Herman B. Wells as university president also proved a positive step for the improvement of race relations. In 1947, local restaurants closed their doors to all customers over a dispute with students about the restaurants' segregation policy. The owners came to Wells, pleading for him to "instruct the students not to picket the closed business." Instead, Wells defended the students and asked, "You mean that you want me to ask the students to surrender their legal rights? You want me to tell them to disregard the law? Surely this is not what you want me to do."<sup>23</sup> Wells acted similarly in integrating the university swimming pool, the basketball team, the university barber shop, and university housing.<sup>24</sup>

Mary Ann Wynkoop's more recent *Dissent in the Heartland: The Sixties at Indiana University* confirms Beck's findings about the "strong influence of the Ku Klux Klan in Indiana history and politics" and that Wells "understood, when many Hoosiers did not, the debilitating effects of racism on the effort to achieve intellectual excellence."<sup>25</sup> Wynkoop argues that in the 1960s, "black students... found more racial tolerance than at many other Midwestern universities."<sup>26</sup> However, the university still had its issues with racism, particularly with "the all-

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 45-59.

<sup>25</sup> Mary Ann Wynkoop, *Dissent in the Heartland: The Sixties at Indiana University*, Indiana University Press, 2002, 116.

<sup>26</sup> Wynkoop, *Dissent in the Heartland: The Sixties at Indiana University*, 116.

white Greek system... whose very existence was based on racial exclusion."<sup>27</sup> Civil rights protests on campus in the 1960s included a successful sit-in on the Little 500 track, demanding that fraternities only be allowed to race if they "eliminated the racially discriminatory clauses in their charters."<sup>28</sup>

The proportion of African-American students on the Bloomington campus has never been high. In the 1960s, African-Americans made up only two percent of the student body compared to six percent of the state's population.<sup>29</sup> That trend continues to the present. In 2018, African-American students made up 4.6% of the undergraduate population with another 2.2% who identified as African-American and another race, and fell to 4.2% for all degrees.<sup>30</sup> Outside of the major cities in Indiana, there is a lack of diversity throughout the state. In Bloomington's closest neighboring city, Martinsville, only 1.6% of residents are African-American and over 95% are white.<sup>31</sup> In the largest suburbs of Indianapolis, Fishers and Carmel, the percentage of African-Americans range from only 3-6% of the population, although both cities have larger Asian populations than Martinsville.<sup>32</sup> These statistics are relevant because over half of the university's student population still comes from within the state, making it quite possible for a significant portion of the student population to have little previous experience of interactions with African-Americans at all.<sup>33</sup> The small population of African-American students at the university would still make it possible for a white student to rarely, if ever, interact with an African-American

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>30</sup> Indiana University Institutional Research and Reporting, "Minority Proportions/'Two or More Races' Breakdown", 2019.

<sup>31</sup> "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Martinsville, Indiana," Census Bureau QuickFacts, U.S. Department of Commerce, July 1, 2018.

<sup>32</sup> "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Fishers, Indiana," Census Bureau QuickFacts, U.S. Department of Commerce, July 1, 2018.; "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Carmel, Indiana," Census Bureau QuickFacts, U.S. Department of Commerce, July 1, 2018.

<sup>33</sup> "See the Freshman Class Profile," Office of Admissions, The Trustees of Indiana University, Accessed December 19, 2019.

student in coursework or extracurriculars. Lack of exposure leads to white students becoming more susceptible to accepting stereotypes, making those stereotypes both dangerous and pervasive.

Despite a prevalent Ku Klux Klan and strong racism in surrounding towns, Bloomington itself became somewhat of an anomaly by the 1960s and was much more accepting of African-American students. President Wells, who served the university in some leadership capacity until his death in 2000, left a lasting legacy of promoting racial tolerance. Still, racially motivated incidents and some claimed "institutional racism" continued to occur on campus, particularly in Greek life.<sup>34</sup>

### **Blackface in Student Productions**

The first uses of blackface at Indiana University appeared in minstrel shows performed by both professional touring troupes and by the university students themselves. It appeared onstage at the University Auditorium throughout the first half of the 20th century, in a range of student productions that were either based entirely on the use of blackface or just featured for comedic effect in a larger production.<sup>35</sup>

The Jordan River Revue was started in 1922 and quickly became a popular, annual production created and performed entirely by Indiana University students.<sup>36</sup> These variety show performances were comprised of dramatic and comedic sketches, musical acts, and occasional dance performances. In the 1943 production, a freshman named Gordon Grow appeared as a solo act in blackface with the performance of "The Black Grow."<sup>37</sup> *The Indiana Daily Student*

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<sup>34</sup> Randy Fabi, "Institutional Racism Haunts IU," *The Indiana Daily Student*, October 28, 1997.

<sup>35</sup> "Students Display Diversified Talent At Revue Opening," *The Indiana Daily Student*, March 17, 1943.

<sup>36</sup> "The Jordan River Revue," Indiana University Libraries, The Trustees of Indiana University, Accessed November 5, 2019.

<sup>37</sup> "Students Display Diversified Talent At Revue Opening," *The Indiana Daily Student*; Show program from 1943 Jordan River Revue, 1943, Collection 242, Box 2, Jordan River Revue records, 1921-1966, bulk 1922-1933, Indiana University Archives.



responded positively to this act and the overall performance, reviewing Grow in particular as having “tickled the ivories in blackface.”<sup>38</sup> Predating the Jordan River Revue, the Union Revue was also student-led and directed, but prohibited female performers.<sup>39</sup> Notable alumnus Hoagy Carmichael can be found in a 1923 *Arbutus* in a production of “Howdy Hector” by the South Sea Island Chorus during the 1922 Union Revue. In the yearbook photo, Carmichael is crouched at center costumed as a monkey with blackface and is surrounded by eight other performers in blackface.<sup>40</sup> (Figure 1) The Union Revue also featured a blackface act in 1917, with the appearance of Earl Douthitt as a “blackface comedian of the higher class.”<sup>41</sup>



Figure 1.

In 1919, the Glee Club successfully toured Indiana with a production that included an act of blackface that not only was “the main attraction” but “kept the crowd in a good humor the rest of the evening.”<sup>42</sup> Students were not necessarily first introduced to blackface once they got to the university, though. After Garrick Club auditions in 1915, the *Indiana Daily Student* reported that, “Minstrel performers seem plentiful. There is one freshman in school who has been interlocutor in

<sup>38</sup> “Students Display Diversified Talent At Revue Opening.”

<sup>39</sup> “The Jordan River Revue,” Indiana University Libraries.

<sup>40</sup> Indiana University, *Arbutus* (Bloomington, Indiana: 1923), 271, Indiana University Archives.

<sup>41</sup> “Sharp Announces Union Revue Cast,” *The Indiana Daily Student*, March 20, 1917.

<sup>42</sup> “Glee Club Departs for Three Day Concert Tour,” *The Indiana Daily Student*, April 16, 1919; “Glee Club Returns After Tour Tired But Happy,” *The Indiana Daily Student*, April 22, 1919.

minstrel shows three times, end man twice and has taken important roles in two blackface comedies.”<sup>43</sup> Outside of student musical or theatre groups, the Women’s Athletic Association held an annual vaudeville show that featured a blackface comedy act in 1917.<sup>44</sup> From as early as 1907 to at least 1911, the University Athletic Association put on a “Big Minstrel Show” as a benefit, and it appears to have been an annual tradition for a time.<sup>45</sup> Students were also exposed to minstrel shows by professional productions of the Elks Minstrels or Jerome & Starks, as they toured through Bloomington.<sup>46</sup>

At least in the first few decades of the twentieth century, blackface was socially acceptable enough to receive wide laughter from audiences and make blackface comedians desirable for student theatre groups. Its use as a fundraising benefit for the University Athletic Association and as a production of the Women’s Athletic Association demonstrated its influence on groups outside of theatre, including seemingly unrelated student or university groups. Up through the 1940s, the use of blackface, particularly in comedy, was not by any means discouraged by the student press. In the instances found, it was always reviewed positively by the newspaper. The replication of the “Howdy Hector” photograph in the 1923 *Arbutus* also demonstrates the acceptance of blackface by the student body at that point, assuming the yearbook went through an editing process with a staff and advisors. The Jordan River Revue and the Glee Club performed the blackface acts not only in Bloomington, but on small tours throughout the state to cities like Indianapolis and Martinsville. These productions were likely not tailored to the student audience or even a Bloomington audience, but the larger Indiana audience.

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<sup>43</sup> “Stage Folks in School? Sure! Just Read This,” *The Indiana Daily Student*, November 9, 1915.

<sup>44</sup> “Vaudeville Program More Varied than Ever,” *The Indiana Daily Student*, November 20, 1917.

<sup>45</sup> “Big Minstrel Show,” *The Daily Student*, February 13, 1907.; “‘After the Dance’ Will Be Performed for Minstrel,” *The Daily Student*, February 27, 1911.

<sup>46</sup> Harris-Grand advertisement, *Bloomington Evening World*, July 12, 1920.; “Elks’ Minstrel Program will Burlesque Campus,” *The Indiana Daily Student*, April 16, 1921.

Despite the fact that these organizations were not Greek in nature, there were still notable ties to fraternities. Hoagy Carmichael was a member of the Kappa Sigma fraternity, and many members of the Jordan River Revue and Garrick Club were also in sororities and fraternities.

### **Blackface at the University School**

The University School was founded in 1938 as a K-12 school for training Indiana University School of Education students that was still professionally staffed with teachers and administrators.<sup>47</sup> The school itself was located between Jordan Avenue and 3rd Street, among campus buildings.<sup>48</sup> While a primary school, its location within the university grounds and its use as training for the School of Education qualifies it for this discussion.

There are several instances of blackface recorded in the *University School Jordannus* yearbooks, all stemming from the recurring event of the Junior Penny Carnival. This event was planned and orchestrated by the junior class every year, it was generally light-hearted in nature, while the senior class produced the more serious Senior Play. The 1947 Junior Penny Carnival featured at least six students performing in blackface, with five male students and one female student. Blackface was not a small feature, but a major aspect of the show as shown by its presence in all six photos depicting the event in the 1948 *Jordannus*.<sup>49</sup> The 1951 Junior Penny Carnival had a similarly large presence with its "Mardi Gras" theme.<sup>50</sup> At least nine students dressed completely in blackface, with the poor, traditionally Southern costumes to match. The following yearbook features the first black student at the University School, and blackface does not reappear in the yearbooks following his arrival. The Junior Penny Carnival tradition

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<sup>47</sup> "Administrative History," *University School Jordannus yearbooks, 1939-1972, 1979*, Indiana University Archives.

<sup>48</sup> "Administrative History," *University School Jordannus yearbooks, 1939-1972, 1979*.

<sup>49</sup> University School, *Jordannus* (Bloomington, Indiana: 1948), 34, Indiana University Archives.

<sup>50</sup> University School, *Jordannus* (Bloomington, Indiana: 1952), 37, Indiana University Archives.

eventually coming to an end entirely.<sup>51</sup> Similar to the student productions at the university level, blackface only appeared at amateur productions like the Junior Penny Carnival and not through the drama or comedy groups at the school.

### **Blackface in the Greek Community**

The most frequent instances of blackface at Indiana University have occurred within the Greek community. This paper will examine several notable incidents: first, the 1945 Watermelon Feast held by Sigma Chi, second, the Homecoming decoration contest won by Delta Upsilon in 1941, and third, the pledge scavenger hunt held by Zeta Beta Tau in 1997. Before examining the three incidents, it is important to note the presence of smaller, less incendiary uses of blackface. Minstrel shows, similar to those put on by other student organizations, were also put on by sororities and fraternities. The Delta Gamma Minstrel Show appeared for consecutive years at the county fair and was reported to be quite the hit, attracting "the widest attention on campus."<sup>52</sup>

In the 1946 *Arbutus*, one can find an entire page devoted to the "Sigma Chi watermelon mess" which features young women, probably sorority members, seated cross-legged in costumes with blackface on while eating watermelon halves, with Sigma Chi fraternity men standing behind them.<sup>53</sup> Among the photos are a few captions, including one saying: "Come on, Gertie, they aren't fattening." (Figure 2) The Sigma Chi watermelon mess appears in other yearbooks, but blackface only appears in the 1946 edition. The fact that it is only the women who use blackface is interesting, especially as the men cheer on from behind, perhaps encouraging quick eating. Additionally, the women are barefooted and wearing clothes typical of poor, Southern women in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. This use of blackface is a reference to the stereotype

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<sup>51</sup> University School, *Jordannus* (Bloomington, Indiana: 1953), Indiana University Archives.

<sup>52</sup> "Cabinet Votes Down Annual County Fair," *The Indiana Daily Student*, March 11, 1916.

<sup>53</sup> Indiana University, *Arbutus* (Bloomington, Indiana: 1946), 103, Indiana University Archives.

that black people particularly enjoy watermelon and that they are impoverished, with bare feet and old-fashioned clothing. The lack of silverware and the act of eating watermelon by halves, while sitting on the floor, adheres to the stereotype that black people are animalistic and without proper manners.

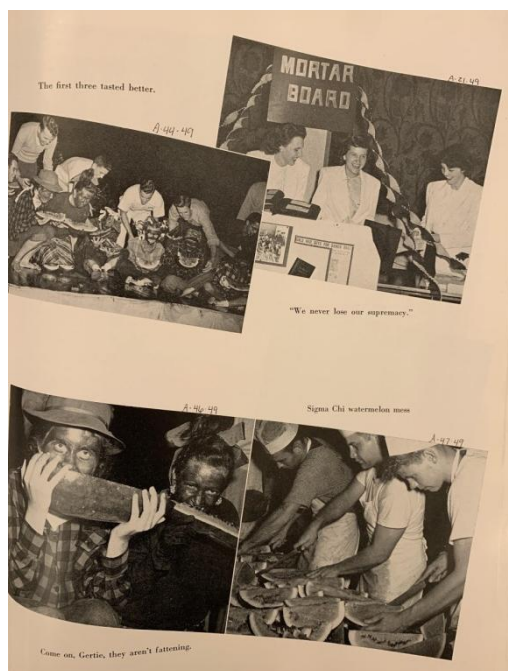


Figure 2.

In the November 1941 issue of the *Indiana Alumni Magazine*, there is an article that recounts the university's Homecoming festivities, as well as the victors of the Homecoming decorating contests.<sup>54</sup> The winning fraternity, Delta Upsilon, is credited for their "man-eating show" with a photo that depicts more than ten fraternity men in full body blackface next to a bonfire. The caption below it: "Delta Upsilon Goes Cannibalistic for Homecoming". (Figure 3) This particular use of blackface plays on the trope, originated in minstrel shows, that black men are animalistic cannibals.

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<sup>54</sup> *Indiana Alumni Magazine* (Bloomington, Indiana: November, 1941), 14-15, Indiana University Archives.



Figure 3.

In October of 1997, six fraternity pledges from Zeta Beta Tau (ZBT) were arrested with a stolen street sign and fraternity letters that belonged to Kappa Alpha Psi, a historically black fraternity on campus.<sup>55</sup> In the truck, the officers found a scavenger hunt that read:

You are all Black Men. Your job tonight is an important one, one which will require great [sic] skill, concentration, agility, and Vaseline. You are confronted with a task tonight that has great history here, everyone has done [sic] it, as will you. This is a task with both incentive and consequence, please note that all the rules will be strictly enforced; and YOU MUST ALL STAY TOGETHER IN CLASS PICTURES. If you stray from the group, you will have [sic] to EAT a retarded kid, diaper and all. Good luck, and stay black.<sup>56</sup>

Additionally, scavenger hunt items included: "4) PICTURE OF YOUR CLASS WITH A BLACK GUY... 16) ANY FUNNY-LOOKIN' MEXICAN (blacksican [sic], extra credit); 17) ANY MIDGET (black midget, [sic] super-extra credit); 18) ANY ALBINO (black albino, you get activated)."<sup>57</sup> Outside of blatant racism and ableism, there were also several items that were astonishingly sexist and homophobic: "12) impression of a nipple (Female) in a jar of peanut butter... 5) Hottest Girl in McNutt w/phone number; 6) Ugliest Girl in McNutt w/phone

<sup>55</sup> Barb Albert, "Frat scandal highlights free-speech issue," *The Indianapolis Star*, October 27, 1997.

<sup>56</sup> "What You Think: ZBT Incident," *The Indiana Daily Student*, October 23, 1997.

<sup>57</sup> "What You Think: ZBT Incident," *The Indiana Daily Student*.

number... 12) Pictures of 2 chicks making out (less clothes, more credit); 13) Picture of chick w/out shirt... 15) Picture of class member pissing on SDT's lawn."<sup>58</sup>

It is not entirely clear whether or not the pledges actually donned blackface, as no photos of the arrest or incident could be located. However, with the instructions to be black and "stay black" as well as the report by *The Indianapolis Star* that the pledges were to "pretend they were all black men," it can be inferred that some sort of blackface or black paint was likely used. Even if not, the scavenger hunt was still a form of performative blackface in that its largest purpose was to impersonate and mock black men.

For most of October, updates and opinions about the scandal dominated *The Indiana Daily Student*, until ZBT was eventually expelled indefinitely from the university.<sup>59</sup>

Unsurprisingly, there was huge backlash from other student groups on campus, including racial and ethnic organizations, other Greek organizations, and from individual students. An interesting aspect of this incident was that it came from a traditionally Jewish fraternity. Some students and Jewish community members worried that retaliation against all Jewish students, and all Jewish Greek members, would follow.<sup>60</sup> The president of the Hillel Center, student Brett Pelchovitz, responded to *The Indiana Daily Student*, "It reflects very poorly on the entire Jewish community... I am very torn about this situation. On one hand, I'm very well-acquainted with the men of ZBT, and I hold them in the highest regard. I know that a number of members saw the list before it went out, and a number didn't."<sup>61</sup> Members of ZBT were also acutely aware of their status as a predominately Jewish fraternity, with one referring to the protests as a form of "reverse

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid. SDT is an abbreviation for Sigma Delta Tau, a national women's sorority that, like ZBT, is historically Jewish. McNutt refers to Paul V. McNutt Quadrangle, a residence hall on the university campus.

<sup>59</sup> Sarah Rupel and Ryan Coleman, "IU Expels ZBT Indefinitely," *The Indiana Daily Student*, October 30, 1997.

<sup>60</sup> Aline Mendelsohn, "Jewish students fear IU reaction," *The Indiana Daily Student*, October 21, 1997.

<sup>61</sup> Aline Mendelsohn, "Jewish students fear IU reaction."

racism."<sup>62</sup> Another fraternity member, seemingly belonging to a chapter other than ZBT, accused *The Indiana Daily Student* as being "anti-Semitic" and "one-sided", and wrote that if the chapter was not predominantly Jewish, it would not receive the same coverage.<sup>63</sup>

The controversy over the scavenger hunt escalated to student protests and overall discussions about institutional racism at the university. Other incidents in recent years were cited, including a party that ZBT hosted the year before that was themed "Night in the 'Hood'... where participants were invited to dress like residents of a ghetto."<sup>64</sup> Following the incident and the fraternity's expulsion, there were many community meetings, protests, and pieces written about systemic racism in Greek life and at the university. Five days after the scavenger hunt, the Office of Afro-American affairs held a rally at the Sample Gates where a protest for the following night was announced. The protest took place at the ZBT house, where over three hundred protestors chanted, "Hey, hey! Ho, ho! ZBT has got to go!"<sup>65</sup> The Student Coalition took the lead on organizing the protest, and was formed only the year prior as a way to "unite minorities on race issues."<sup>66</sup> Some students tried to avoid defending ZBT while advocating for less extreme punishment. A sophomore sorority member claimed that Greek life is just "an easier target than the 80 percent of IU that's not in a social fraternity or sorority" and asked, "is it simply having Halloween a little early, where you can be anyone you want? Does Halloween offend you?"<sup>67</sup> Others were worried that removing ZBT from campus would not teach the men anything, and certainly "will not end racism at IU."<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Emily Somerset and Jeff Rose, "North Jordan residents express varied reactions," *The Indiana Daily Student*, October 22, 1997.

<sup>63</sup> Todd Eltimsahy, "One-sided coverage," *The Indiana Daily Student*, October 23, 1997.

<sup>64</sup> Aline Mendelsohn, "ZBT President faces irate audience," *The Indiana Daily Student*, October 21, 1997.

<sup>65</sup> Beth Spangle, "Students Protest ZBT," *The Indiana Daily Student*, October 22, 1997.

<sup>66</sup> Stacey Zolt, "Coalition calls for protest," *The Indiana Daily Student*, October 21, 1997.

<sup>67</sup> "What You Think: ZBT Incident," *The Indiana Daily Student*

<sup>68</sup> "What You Think: ZBT Incident."



It is not surprising that Greek life is the area where blackface was most prominent at Indiana University. It is often the most segregated, privileged group on campus and many traditionally white fraternities and sororities have rooted traditions of racism or "blackballing" of minority students. Due to the secretive nature of these organizations, probably incidents have occurred, and may still occur, that have not appeared in yearbooks, newspapers, or libraries. Had the truck of ZBT pledges not been pulled over in 1997, the scavenger hunt would probably not have been discovered by the public. Although claiming "everyone has done [sic] it" may have just been part of the hazing, it is also possible that the scavenger hunt and its activities were not entirely new that year.

### **African-American Students' Response**

There is currently no evidence of an African-American student's response to the blackface incidents on campus in the early to mid-twentieth century. As the African-American student population increased, so did Civil Rights activism, but the evidence suggests that the activism largely focused on goals to integrate parts of the university: "recruit more black undergraduate and graduate students; establish black history and literature courses; demand that the IU Foundation provide scholarship funds for underprivileged black students; and waive entrance requirements so that more black students could be admitted to IU."<sup>69</sup> Particularly in the 1940s, when the Sigma Chi Watermelon Mess and Delta Upsilon Homecoming display took place, African-American students had larger qualms with racism at the university and in the country.

However, by the 1997 ZBT incident there were well-established organizations on campus that did not hold back in their criticisms of the fraternity and of the university. The Office of African-American Affairs, and its Dean Lawrence Hanks, the Black Student Union, the

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<sup>69</sup> Wynkoop, *Dissent in the Heartland: The Sixties at Indiana University*, 124.

predominantly African-American National Panhellenic Council and its fraternities and sororities, and the aforementioned Student Coalition all participated in panel discussions, protests, and rallies following the incident. They also used the hazing incident as an opportunity to further address the institutional racism of the Greek community and of the university as a whole. The Coordinator of Diversity Programs, Steve Birdine, asked at a panel, "Why should we expect the administration to do something to a student group that they won't do to themselves? How many isolated incidents do we have to have to realize there's a problem?"<sup>70</sup> Afro-American studies professor Daniel Rome explained, "People are outraged and rightly so. But I think people are focusing their energy on the fraternity and not the structure that is allowing this incident to occur. If the University is serious about making the climate comfortable, it seems to me there should be more things to check for such a blatant act of racism."<sup>71</sup> On the student side, the president of Kappa Alpha Psi spoke on the vandalism of his fraternity house, "when they took the letters off my house, I felt like I had a cross burning in my yard."<sup>72</sup> The president of the National Panhellenic Council urged, "If Zeta Beta Tau is sorry, then let them say it to my face and to every face that is offended by its actions."<sup>73</sup>

### **Conclusion**

From minstrel productions to the ill-fated scavenger hunt, the uses of blackface at Indiana University have changed over time but remained stable in their symbolism of racism and segregation. Blackface was used to play on harmful stereotypes of black people in the U.S., including the cannibalistic blackface of Delta Upsilon, the gorilla costume in Howdy Hector, or the "ghetto" of ZBT's themed party. Blackface was consistently used by those in places of

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<sup>70</sup> Christin Nance, "Students discuss ways to improve diversity relations," *The Indiana Daily Student*, October 28, 1997.

<sup>71</sup> Randy Fabi, "Institutional Racism Haunts IU," *The Indiana Daily Student*, October 28, 1997.

<sup>72</sup> Jeff Rose, "Students unite to Rally at Sample Gates," *The Indiana Daily Student*, October 21, 1997.

<sup>73</sup> Zolt, "Coalition calls for protest."

privilege, particularly white men and women in Greek life but also those outside of it in the early twentieth century. Some student performances seemed styled after vaudeville or professional minstrel troupes, while the three notable fraternity incidents were a style of their own.

Both new and old forms of blackface are a demonstration of racial dominance that allowed white students on campus to send a message to African-American students. While African-American students began to be welcomed and accepted in the university, blackface and other forms of racial taunts remained in order for white students to maintain social power and a sense of superiority. The aspect of "racial urges" is important to consider in this specific example, particularly as many of the white students who came to Indiana University had little prior interaction with African-Americans, if any at all.<sup>74</sup> When white students came in contact with African-Americans for the first time, did they feel the "natural" urge to perform "cultural robbery" of black culture? Did white students feel that by performing in racist scavenger hunts or Homecoming displays, they were asserting their own racial dominance over the African-American students? While it is not possible to know for sure, the instincts to use blackface may have stemmed from a combination of discomfort, envy, repulsion, and obsession with the black male body and black culture. The instincts to conform to the in-group, follow the crowd, and the fallacies of "groupthink" could have played a role. Additionally, non-marginalized groups have the privilege of not thinking about race often; these students may have actually thought it was not harmful because they had never been hurt on account of their race. This is evidenced by the comparison the sophomore made between the ZBT incident and Halloween costumes, claiming that the students were simply playing a game for fun.

It has been pointed out that the greatest number of blackface incidents, and overall racism, at Indiana University occurred within the social Greek community. There are a number of

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<sup>74</sup> Beck, *Some Aspects of Relations at Indiana University, My Alma Mater*.

explanations for this beyond that this group of students are predominantly white and are often from wealthier backgrounds. This community, like at other universities, is segregated from the rest of the campus and as one student noted in 1997, exists in "isolation from the rest of campus and the community."<sup>75</sup> This separation has deepened as the Greek system establishes its own community rules, traditions, and values that do not align with the values of the university or of the entire university community. Additionally, this separation and the reluctance to diversify the social fraternities and sororities created an "Us vs. Them" mentality that was intensified in periods of conflict, as they did during the protests after the scavenger hunt. "Othering" to white fraternities was and is more than just the rest of campus, but specifically other racial and ethnic groups. It is not impossible that criticism for lack of diversity from minority groups, like the Student Coalition, only furthered a simultaneous racial envy and repulsion among the fraternity members. The ZBT scavenger hunt occurred only a year after they were criticized for their "hood" party by the same group.

It should be noted that Indiana University is not alone in its long history of blackface. In comparison with other universities, blackface was less common at IU than at universities in the South or in other parts of the Midwest. President Herman B. Wells, who served the university as President and Chancellor from 1938-2000, was well-known for promoting racial tolerance and integration: it is not unlikely his influence on campus and popularity with students made an impact in this area. Discussion of Indiana University's history of blackface and overall institutional racism is critical, as the university still struggles with issues of racism, particularly among its still "overwhelmingly white and heteronormative" social-interest sororities and

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<sup>75</sup> Christin Nance, "Students discuss ways to improve diversity relations," *The Indiana Daily Student*, October 28, 1997.

fraternities.<sup>76</sup> While blackface itself may not occur, other forms of mockery and “cultural robbery” persist. In 2018, a freshman posted a Snapchat story of “a pregnancy test, a pack of cigarettes, a rolled-up dollar bill, multiple condoms and what appeared to be a small drug bag” with a filter that said “Being Black in America Is...”<sup>77</sup> The university has yet to adequately engage with its own unique history of blackface. As headlines haunt other universities, there has been no acknowledgement of the use of blackface by the admired Hoagy Carmichael. His statue rests only feet away from the Neal Marshall Black Culture Center.<sup>78</sup>

### **Limitations & Future Research**

There were some limitations to this history of blackface at Indiana University, and there are several areas for potential research that can be explored. One limitation stemmed from the difficulty of using *The Indiana Daily Student*, as it has not been digitized and is therefore not searchable. It is true to its name and has been published daily, meaning there is a vast amount of microfilm to skim through. Due to the large scope of this research, it was not possible to find every instance of blackface that occurred at Indiana University and there are certainly incidents that were missed. Additionally, the secretive nature of Greek fraternities and sororities implies that there were probably blackface incidents or other hazing rituals that were never discovered or reported. Future research could involve interviews with former members of the University community based upon their own recollections.

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<sup>76</sup> Editorial Board, “Greek life has lost its identity at IU,” *The Indiana Daily Student*, January 13, 2019.

<sup>77</sup> IDS Staff, “IU student's Snapchat story playing off racial stereotypes sparks backlash,” *The Indiana Daily Student*, February 8, 2018.

<sup>78</sup> Robert Mack, “For the love of Venus: IU statues and where they came from,” *The Indiana Daily Student*, December 7, 2017.



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