



THE SURVEILLANCE OF BLACKNESS IN THE KARDASHIANS' WELLNESS EMPIRE

In 2021, *Keeping up with the Kardashians* (KUWTK) aired its twentieth and final season. During its fourteen-year run, the show brought unparalleled commercial success to its stars, a group of five sisters managed by their mother. A family that began with no exceptional talents now boasts one of the “youngest self-made billionaire[s] of all time” (Forbes 2019); the original social media influencers; two cosmetic companies – Kylie Cosmetics and KKW; a shapewear line – SKIMS; multiple endorsements and sponsors; thirteen spin-off shows; and the highest-paid model in the world for five years in a row. The Kardashians exert their power and influence through their show and social media.¹ In recent years, the family has focused on health and wellbeing, endorsing products for weight loss and health, from “literally unreal” (Fig.1) appetite suppressant lollipops to collagen coffee that will “help you look and feel younger and grab a hold of that coveted glow” (Dubin 2019) so you too can look and feel like a Kardashian. With hard work, confidence, and these specific products, Kardashian glamor and fame is framed as achievable for all.

In what follows I examine the medicinal wellness products peddled by the Kardashians, focusing first on the extreme forms of surveillance built into both the marketing of these products and the assessment of their results. I argue that the family’s

Heena Hussain
The University
of Manchester
United Kingdom

1. Even though Kris, Kylie, and Kendall have the surname Jenner, I follow the lead of the show in referring to the family and its collective public persona as “the Kardashians” throughout this article.

interaction with the camera and the aesthetics of their social media cross-promotions combine to present a sense of open honesty, promising the replication of their success and beauty for their audiences. In the second half of the essay, I discuss the engagements with blackness accompanying the Kardashians' claims they will capacitate and beautify white feminine subjects, engagements now commonly termed "blackfishing." Through reading the Kardashians' blackfishing, I show how they have created an intense regime of self-surveillance, even dabbling self-consciously in the carceral state's techniques for surveilling blackness, to construct themselves as both uncommonly, exotically sexual ("baring all") and respectable enough to sell various remedies with dubious health value. By reading these two aspects of the Kardashians' beauty/fashion/media empire, I explore how their racial positioning, and even their experiments with techniques for the surveillance of blackness, allows them to maintain a collective exotic sexualized image while also securing the respectability they need to sell pseudomedical products.

In attempting to understand the place and popularity of these remedies in conjunction with blackfishing, I make use of Kyla Wazana Tompkins' (2017) idea of white sovereign entrepreneurial terror. Tompkins coined this term to expose and understand the hierarchical separation between black and white bodies in the late 19th-century United States, a separation made clear by pamphlets advertising "SSS Tonic" that positioned the fraudulent medicine they marketed to white sufferers next to caricatured visions of ongoing black incapacity. The Kardashians, I argue here, adopt a similar formula, promising beauty and capacity to their white subjects through both fraudulent medicines and an exploitative engagement with blackness. Unlike the patent remedies Tompkins describes, which encourage intoxicated disinhibition, the Kardashians promote self-control and self-management; organization of the self through exercise, mindfulness, and family; and bodily beautification through diet and other wellness products, following what Rosalind Gill describes as the postfeminist logic by which the "the female body [...] is constructed as a window to the individual's interior life" (Gill, 2007: ??). The Kardashians construct the attainment of beauty as "redemptive" (Nguyen

2011: 362), capable of facilitating both the inclusion of outsiders and class mobility. The Kardashians' specific performances of femininity, which they display through their social media, are meant to convince their target audience of middle- and working-class women that by replicating the Kardashians' performances and consuming their products, they will not only be able to enter exclusive spaces, but also gain a part of the success the family has achieved. However, as I show in the second half of the essay, replicating the Kardashians' performances also entails dabbling in blackness in a way that invites surveillance. This playful incitement to racialized surveillance has cemented the Kardashians' whiteness, while also intensifying the surveillance culture that has disastrous consequences for black people.

"WOULD YOU STOP TAKING PICTURES OF YOURSELF?
YOUR SISTER'S GOING TO JAIL."

Mimi Thi Nguyen (2011) describes how the widespread "dedication to beauty" (359) in US culture not only brings women together, but also constitutes a "part of imperial statecraft" (361). Beauty is a tool used to manipulate subjects of US empire, particularly women, into conforming to Western beauty standards and controlling other women through the lens of these standards. This promise of beauty contains within it the promise that a certain type of feminine womanhood is empowering, and that imitation of US beauty standards constitutes power and agency over one's identity. In Rosalind Gill's (2007) discussion of postfeminism, she similarly argues that the sexualization of culture is constructed for women through "discipline, self-surveillance" (151) and constant monitoring. The most "striking aspect" of postfeminist media culture, Gill argues, is the "obsessive preoccupation with the body" (141) and the maintenance required to achieve the body society accepts. But the compulsion to create and maintain such a body is disguised by the neoliberal rhetoric of individual choice and empowerment, which transforms "the work of being watched" (Gill 2019: 159) into a freely chosen form of self-improvement; through multiple modes of surveillance working concurrently, an "entrepreneurial ethic dominates" (159) as capitalist patriarchy extracts value and labor from the body. In the media, white and white-passing

Heena Hussain
*The University
of Manchester
United Kingdom*

women are viewed as active laborers, producing and maintaining their bodies. I present the Kardashians as examples of active entrepreneurs profiting from their bodies, exploiting gendered surveillance regimes by allegedly “baring all,” and inviting media into all aspects of their lives.

The Kardashians perpetuate their ethic of constant body maintenance through the endorsement of their questionable products. The matriarchal family partially attributes their “enviable” figures to the multiple health and wellness products they sell on social media, making extravagant claims around the success of the products. Akin to the use of “spectacular [...] testimonials” (Tompkins 2017: 66) from the white consumers who were the “primary customer base” (67) for 19th century patent medicines, the sisters use their own testimonials through both the visual image and the written caption beneath to persuade their fans to buy and use “wellness” products whose benefits are untested and which sometimes have harmful health effects, using their “natural” yet spectacular bodies, to which consumers have constant access because of their perpetual, multimodal self-surveillance, as evidence of the products’ medicinal benefits. Through their constant posting across multiple platforms of social media, the Kardashians invite viewers to live alongside them; the replication of their habits and consumption is peddled as key to mimicking their success, beauty and “body confidence.”

The Kardashians’ invention of postfeminist entrepreneurial terror began with their forays into reality television. Kim Kardashian entered the limelight of US celebrity culture in 2002 upon the release of her sex tape, which she followed up with a star turn in Paris Hilton’s reality show. Reality TV has always been about surveillance: Mark Andrejevic describes the growth of the “surveillant imaginary” (2015: ix) taking hold in contemporary culture and how surveillance “provides a certain guarantee of authenticity” (Andrejevic 2002: 265). The Kardashians innovated the basic form of reality-show surveillance, combining the leak of Kim’s private sex tape with the more everyday surveillance of a lifestyle reality show in order to allow Kim’s body to “acquire and display their cultural capital” (Winch 2015: 232) as she moved from the position of victim of unwanted surveillance to deliberate purveyor

of self-surveillance. Through the initial taboo of exposed female sexuality and intimacy, Kim Kardashian capitalized on her body in the same way as Hilton, who also had a leaked sex tape. Hilton established herself within the world of reality tv as a wealthy white socialite inviting audiences into an unseen world. Kim was able to mimic Hilton's success, adding an angle of Americanized exoticism. Her Armenian ancestry gave her a palatable foreignness, making her into a fresh object for audiences to scrutinize. Maria Pramaggiore and Diane Negra (2014) describe the show as "nothing short of a phenomenon" (76) as "Kris Jenner carves careers for her daughters [...] all under the auspices of the Kardashian family brand" (78). The cohesive family unit became a powerhouse dominating multiple platforms through the lens of the postfeminist celebrity via surveillance.

Keeping Up with the Kardashians pioneered new forms of post-feminist surveillance culture. Little is kept private early on as the elder Kardashian trio discloses nearly everything, from the sisters' constant sex talk to Kourtney being filmed giving birth twice. In 2007, Khloe was sentenced to two nights in jail for a DUI. The cameras broadcast the family's journey there, and on the drive, Kris exclaims to Kim "Would you stop taking pictures of yourself? Your sister's going to jail," (*KUWTK*) while simultaneously disregarding and thus giving tacit approval to the other camera that continues to film the incident. Khloe's mugshot has also been framed and seen around their homes later in the show. The sisters are unashamed of their bodies; they are open for discussion and viewing amongst the sisters, and the audience is witness to this. In the fourth season finale, footage of Kourtney in labor with her first son Mason Dash Disick aired to 4.8 million viewers. In an interview with Australia's *Today Extra* (2016), Kourtney revealed that the footage was filmed by her then-boyfriend Scott Disick as a "home movie," but her experience of labor "was amazing" and she "really wanted to share it with people because it was my child." During Mason's birth the camera pans to the multiple family members in the room, capturing their engagement with the camera as well as the moment where Kourtney reaches between her legs, holds Mason by his underarms, and finishes pulling him out. Throughout the footage there is a steady stream of noise from machines

Heena Hussain
The University
of Manchester
United Kingdom

and medical practitioners, with an audible exclamation heard off-screen as Kourtney helps to deliver her own baby. Her self-midwifing is framed as a moment of female power and strength, made even more empowering by her enthusiastic desire for the surveillance of such an intimate process. The sisters' sexual frankness was present from the beginning of the show, presenting the "female body as a power source" (Pramaggiore and Negra 2014: 88). The neoliberal choice to capitalize on oneself combines with the feminist display Kourtney supplies; the family broaches taboo topics and incites candid conversations that further draw attention to the surveillance of intimate and private moments.

In 2019, Kourtney Kardashian established Poosh, a lifestyle and wellbeing website and e-commerce destination. The articles posted on the website concentrate on "solutions to the dilemmas of [the] contemporary" and changes women can make to upgrade their "selfhood" (Poosh). Her brand reflects her persona on KUWTK as the most health-conscious in the family. She and her three children abstain from using a microwave, as well as from eating sugar, dairy, and gluten, and their food is served on earthenware or wooden dishes. This conflation of virtuous consumer choice and beauty resonates with Nguyen's (2011: 370) explanation of "self-esteem", which informs the transformative ability of beauty in "feeling good" but also "doing good." Kourtney voices this message to her followers through her numerous posts on Poosh detailing how to "live your best life" while still being "sexy or cool" (Poosh); this is achievable, she insists, as well as being good for the environment. Just as Kylie and the other Kardashians regularly posted across platforms to advertise KUWTK, Poosh advertises its holistic lifestyle with each platform serving a different purpose and demographic. Twitter is utilized to present a savvy company engaging with its consumers. Snapchat has curated eye-pleasing stories, with each tap providing a new image linked to a Poosh article or product. Instagram is a never-ending narrative, where each image is something to be desired, replicated and reproduced. Also available is immediate access into selling the products through a "link in bio," "shop" button, and shopping tab function.

Heena Hussain
The University
of Manchester
United Kingdom

One product often featured on Poosh is the Pink Moon Milk Collagen Latte, created in collaboration with Vital Proteins. When promoting this product on Poosh's and her personal Instagram, Kourtney emphasizes the drink's heavily feminine aesthetic, with its pastel-hued labels, ethereal name, and soft pink color before and after it is brewed. In the online shop linked to Kourtney's website, the drink is promoted alongside specific glasses and similar products that will help consumers to best "enjoy" and "feel the effects" of the drink. The drink is part of a larger lifestyle change Poosh encourages women to participate in, to achieve beauty and euphoria. Poosh then reposts the images of regular women with the product as testimonials and encouragement to further mimicry. Much like the patent remedies Tompkins (2017) analyses, Kourtney turns to ingredients connected with herbal medicine but whose medical benefits are often unproven. For the collagen drink, the website states the product has not been tested by the FDA and is not a cure for ailments. Gill mentions the "development of beauty pharmacology" (2019:157) which paired with Poosh's holistic natural angle only furthers the "postfeminist surveillant beauty culture."

Three other dietary and health related products stand out amongst the many endorsed by the Kardashians, all of which connect their alleged nutritional value with body reshaping through "modified consumption habits" (Gill 2007:156). Two products the Kardashians endorse are from the same brand, Flat Tummy Co. Flat Tummy's Meal Replacement Shakes claim to help consumers on their weight loss journeys while their Appetite Suppressant Lollipops claim to suppress hunger. However, the company credits the ingredients with only a handful of credible studies to support their claims. The Kardashians also endorse SugarBearHair, a blue gummy-bear shaped hair vitamin accompanied by only a vague description of what a consumer can expect to achieve by taking it. The product description claims it contains all the "nutrients needed to meet your hair goals"(SugarBearHair), although it does have a disclaimer akin to that attached to the collagen drink. Several nutritionists have warned that SugarBearHair contains lead, with lab tests indicating high levels, and if more than the recommended twice daily dosage was ingested, the levels of lead will have exceeded California's maximum

allowable dose levels.² However, the appeal of the SugarBearHair is the “delicious”³ taste, and the blue shape reminiscent of gummy-bear sweets is “instagrammable.” Invoking nostalgia and the connotations of innocence and childhood, SugarBearHair presents itself as non-harmful. However, on the Kardashians’ Instagrams, the sisters present an alternative look at the gummy bear as one that bridges the journey from youth to adulthood as they strike sultry poses with the bears. (Fig.1) The lollipop also connotes youth but when posing with it, it carries sexual tones, targeting both girls who wish to emulate their idols and young adult women who see the tongue-in-cheek innuendo.



Fig.1 Kim's Appetite Suppressant Lollipop endorsement post on Instagram

These products are accessories to the Kardashians’ faces and bodies, accentuating their beauty and sexual power. In their advertisements online, the Kardashians propagate terror through beauty by continuously promoting diet culture and supplements

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2. As the Kardashians live in California, I use the state’s dosage level.
 3. Many reviews on the SugarBearHair Amazon Listing claim the bears taste delicious, and the product has a flavor rating of 4.3 out of 5. Kylie and Kim’s Instagram endorsed images are also found on this listing.

to vulnerable audiences whilst undergoing surgeries or digital photographic manipulation to contort their features and bodies into desirable shapes. Beauty is seen as a right, “made particularly visible on the body” (Nguyen 2011: 368) and this visibility leads to “scanning and surveilling the self in ever more minute fashion.” (Gill 2019: 157) Furthermore, the ability to modify oneself through apps only increases the visibility of the female body and face as “a site of crisis and commodification” (157). Khloe’s infamous face-tuning Instagram post incited outcry at her self-modification to a point of almost unrecognizability as she altered her face so drastically fans were questioning if she had undergone surgery. Social media allows a space for users to play with their own image, altering and modifying themselves to achieve the unachievable, even as far as masquerading as another race.

THE KARDASHIANS’ SOVEREIGN ENTREPRENEURIAL TERROR AND THE SURVEILLANCE OF BLACKNESS

Above we’ve seen how postfeminist sovereign entrepreneurial terror cultivates investments in beauty, teaching consumer audiences to surveil themselves through consumption of unsafe and untested products. Below I explore the racial logic of these investments, tracking how the Kardashians adopt the aesthetics of blackness to invite surveillance and to teach other women to invite surveillance. The effect of this is to normalize a culture of surveillance that disproportionately impacts black women whether or not they are reading and participating in Poosh. The Kardashians’ juxtaposition of “black debility and white health” (Tompkins 2017: 75) is but a part of white sovereign entrepreneurial terror, in which the freedoms allowed to white bodies are “deployed as a kind of terrorizing vulgarity” (75) against non-white but particularly black bodies. The culture of blackface performance, which persisted well into the mid-twentieth century, meant that white performers adopted a caricatured version of blackness, donning aspects of the black body while violently preventing black people from representing themselves. In the twenty-first-century white bodies such as the Kardashians’ performing blackness are still more acceptable than black bodies. Kim’s curvaceous body is made

Heena Hussain
The University
of Manchester
United Kingdom

acceptable by her white ancestry; her privilege makes it possible for her to be simultaneously exotically desirable and respectable.

The Kardashian family are entrepreneurial terrorists through their use of “historically recurrent [...] aesthetic[s]” (Tompkins 2017: 55), benefitting from and marking a new phase in the separation between black and white bodies. The family’s form of terror takes shape in anti-blackness and white supremacy, as they portray black women without the history or *enfleshment* (Weheliye 2014) that they carry. Their motherhood, bodies, and caricatural behavior are rooted in embodying the black female body while also remaining white and separate from black agendas or issues. They are constantly accused of cultural appropriation for performing acts such as darkening their skin with self-tanner or copying and renaming hairstyles with cultural significance. The Kardashians’ relationship to race is complicated and ever-changing. Despite having Armenian ancestry, their “relationship to whiteness and racialization” (Dubrofsky and Wood 2015: 102) situates them in between women of color and white women fetishizing and appropriating black women.⁴ Kim’s rise to fame along with her entire family’s success depended on two things: the many forms of surveillance she experienced and invited; and the sexualization and modification of her figure with a heightened focus on her rear, which has been the source of great controversy, conversation, and publicity for the family. Kim’s trademark poses, which make clear reference to Hottentot Venus, have been described as the exoticization of black features implemented onto white bodies to make them acceptable (Jackson 2019: 39–41). While Saartjie Baartman and other black women were historically kept as freak show attractions for their bodies, Kim gained fame and fortune.⁵ Kylie Jenner’s transformation, when she used lip fillers, tanning, and alleged surgeries to reshape her face, has also been the source of numerous articles, as it developed

4. The eldest three Kardashians are Armenian on their father’s side (Robert Kardashian was a third-generation Armenian-American), and white on their mother’s side. The younger sisters’ parents, Kris and Caitlyn Jenner, are both of European descent. This divide separates and further complicates the transformations some members of the family have undergone.

5. Hottentot Venus was an appellation given to a few South African Khoikhoi women who were displayed as freak show attractions in Europe. Saartjie Baartman is the most well-known of the exhibited women.

Heena Hussain
The University
of Manchester
United Kingdom

on screen for audiences to witness the changes. Her body shape has also come under fire as she displayed a drastic change in her figure now complementary to Kim's which is often credited to her Armenian heritage.

Performances of blackface, Michael Rogin (1996: 12) states, "turned Europeans into Americans"; Rogin explains that "no one was white before he/she came to America." Whiteness in the United States, rather, was solidified "vis-à-vis Blackness and settler colonialism" (Tompkins 2017: 53). Rogin explains that to elevate into whiteness a separation and distinction had to be drawn between races, placing black people at the bottom. The complex dynamics of blackface utilized originally in the form of minstrelsy, allowed "one subjugated group, the white working class" (Rogin 1996: 47) to distinguish themselves from their class and heritage by emphasizing their difference from blackness. By performing blackness and then removing it, it was as if they were unveiling their true whiteness. While blackface now only occasionally resurfaces in insensitive Halloween costumes, tanning has ushered in its next counterpart—blackfishing. Journalist Wanna Thompson coined the term in a 2018 twitter thread, calling out blackfishing as a new form of cultural appropriation and the latest example of how blackness is framed as desirable while black women are not (Collinge 2021). There have since been many critical uses of the term across social media, particularly in before and after posts, showing or exposing celebrities and other social media users participating in blackfishing. Where blackface entails a white person painting themselves black and drawing caricature features upon their faces, blackfishing is more complex, involving deeply tanning the skin, wearing hairstyles created and worn by black women, or having surgeries to enlarge certain body parts to recreate the black female body in the eyes of the US. Blackfishing also resembles practices in the 19th century US when black people and objects were used as decoration and entertainment. (Neyra 2020) By superimposing the black body onto their own white bodies, the Kardashians, amongst others, use blackfishing as adornments maintaining their space in entertainment through black exploitation. Hyper-sexualized and objectified, the black female body is then reduced to stereotypes to be overlaid onto white bodies. Blackfishing thus creates

a dichotomy of black women who look and fulfil the aesthetic of the black American woman and then those women who fail by not having the correct attributes. Blackfishing also creates a new aesthetic as white women who blackfish retain specific European features that conform to a Western standard of beauty.

Some earlier scholarly writing on the Kardashians posits that due to her Armenian heritage, Kim Kardashian has been objectified in tabloid magazines as an “ethnic woman,” a palatable ideal “off-white curvaceous body” (Pramaggiore and Negra 2014: 86). I argue that while this may once have been true, the dynamic has shifted: the Kardashians have transformed themselves over time, transitioning from ethnic or not-quite-white to being viewed through the same lenses as white women. Dubrofsky and Wood (2015) compare how white women were described as “working for the gaze” (99) while more ethnic women were described as innately erotic. To make this argument, they suggest that Miley Cyrus and Kim Kardashian are viewed as racially distinct, with Kim representing an ethnic woman. However, more recently the Kardashians have created a narrative aligning them more with whiteness than their Armenian heritage. They consistently draw attention to the work they attribute their success to, a narrative which has intensified in recent years as the family’s appearance was called into questions surrounding allegations of plastic surgeries.⁶ Like early 20th-century immigrants, the Kardashians have secured whiteness through engagements with caricatures and white tropes of blackness.

While the Kardashians utilize both self-surveillance and blackness to secure their identities as white women, surveillance works very differently for actual black people. Few black celebrities remain in the spotlight within their homes and private lives

6. The Kardashians largely refute these claims, citing personal trainers and diets as well as their own marketed products as reasons for their physical appearance. As proof, the surveillance increases with shared recipes and videos of their fitness regimes online. Their platforms share intimate details, enticing audiences to watch them and comment online. This creates cyclical surveillance, as audiences watch the Kardashians and then self-surveille on social media, through comments or imitation—such as using the same products or eating the same food and posting it for their own followers to see.

Heena Hussain
The University
of Manchester
United Kingdom

the way the Kardashians do, as surveillance “reifies the social construct of race” (Browne 2012: 72) and is used to control and condemn people of color. Black people have historically been subject to unwanted surveillance; Simone Browne (2015), describes early forms of biometric surveillance enslaved people had to endure and traces those structures of surveillance through to present-day policing. Racial surveillance enforces “discriminatory and violent treatment” (8) and is a tool of “social control” (16) used to define and reify stereotypes with lethal consequences. Where the Kardashians have achieved celebrity status through surveillance, black women are forced to be surveilled: Browne discusses, as just one example, contemporary airport personnel’s “invasive pat downs [and] hair searches” (28) of black women.

Black hair, too, remains a source of contention for black women and girls, with many regulations within schools and workplaces regulating the hairstyles they are allowed to adopt. However, those same hairstyles are worn with white privilege in Kardashian workspaces. Translated onto white bodies these hairstyles become acceptable, despite having real consequences for black women, such as hostility in the workplace, job terminations, or withheld education as students are sent home. During a Vogue photoshoot in 2019 meant to invoke the 1970s, Kendall’s hair was teased out to voluminous curls some saw as akin to an afro. The images were met with outrage online, at her appropriation of the hairstyle and the lack of real representation from black models by Vogue. Kim has also been accused of culturally appropriating hairstyles, such as when she wore Fulani braids to an award show or when she wore cornrows and called them “Bo Derek” braids, in reference to the white actress who wore them in the 1970s, erasing the long history and significance of cornrows as an African hairstyle.⁷ But the controversies have not stopped Kim from wearing her hair in appropriated hairstyles and have not stopped the praise from tabloids on her “daring” hair choices.

There are many more instances where the sisters perform blackfishing, the images sandwiched between their posts as white

7. “Depictions of women with cornrows have been found in Stone Age paintings in the Tassili Plateau of the Sahara, and have been dated as far back as 3000 B.C.” (Page 2001)

women. Their celebrity status and the lack of repercussions for their blackfishing is available for all to see, as they engage in these practices largely online and through multiple surveillance mechanisms. Another example is a well-known photo shoot of Kim, in which she balances a champagne glass on her rear while looking back at the camera. Lauren Jackson (2019: 37) points out that this shoot is identical to the 1976 shoot that “made Goude famous.” However, while Goude’s art focused on the black body, this same shoot was replicated with Kim who wasn’t “even really brown” (37) at the time. The longer she has continued to perform blackness, the whiter Kim has become. From deepening her tan to wearing black hairstyles under whitewashed names, to even using her half-black children in shoots, putting them under surveillance with her to validate her blackness, Kim has consistently used blackfishing techniques that have only pushed her more into the space of white womanhood. Her start and the family’s rise were dependent, Jackson points out, on “Kim’s distance from whiteness, however relative” (39). Jackson traces how Kim and her sisters have trained the focus of the public onto their bodies, constructing their racial indeterminacy and play as alluring, and how this public gaze has then allowed them to “accumulate capital elsewhere” (2019: 38), through their business endeavors and endorsements. However, if Kim started out not-quite-white, she developed her whiteness over time, altering her face shape through contouring to make it fit the Western standard of beauty, and changing the narrative to focus on the work put in by the family to achieve their body types as though it was not a natural phenomenon dependent on genetics. The Kardashians continue to play with race to keep a steady unwavering gaze trained upon them, so as not to lose the limelight. They seem to have reduced this racial play a bit recently, perhaps having reached the stature and wealth they had so desired, but also potentially because many of them have mixed-race children with black fathers who can operate as their ties to blackness and as proof that the sisters “have biologically reproduced white domesticity,” capitalizing on “multiracial white supremacy” (Neyra 2020).

Part of the terror the sisters engage in, then, is through the appropriation of stereotypical physical features and aesthetics,

Heena Hussain
The University
of Manchester
United Kingdom

which terrorize actual black women, who are not able to abandon their blackness and who are thus harmed by the stereotypes with which the sisters play. Superimposing racial features that they pick and choose has updated the terror of blackface into the realm of blackfishing, alongside the disregard of systemic oppression black bodies face. Khloe and Kylie, often “considered the plain Janes” (Jackson 2019: 39) of the family, have relied heavily on hood culture to draw attention to themselves, transforming into the “black girl[s] of [their] dreams” (40) through both digital image alteration and physical workouts and surgery.⁸ As rich white women they played a narrative of being black girls from the “hood” using aesthetics, as Jackson argues, “better known to girls from places a woman like [Khloe] would never go” (40). By staking a claim on these aesthetics and appropriations, they invested in becoming white women by acting black. Each response from infuriated internet users only fueled more conversation around the women and cemented their whiteness, much like blackface performance validated whiteness in the past. However, blackfishing generally seems to have a different, if related goal, namely to remain ethnically ambiguous and enjoy the achievement of the hybrid ethnic-white beauty standard that women of color may attempt to hold themselves to. Where real women of color may fall short of this fabricated standard, white women flourish under their fabrications, praised for conforming to Western beauty standards while still appearing as ethnic.

The aesthetic the Kardashians exploit is one belonging to black women, but they are no longer the only ones doing so. Other white women on social media, particularly Instagram, have been accused of blackfishing. Instagrammer Emma Hallberg was accused of blackfishing by followers when a message she sent to someone affirming she was white was spread on multiple social media platforms. Dubbed the “Kardashian effect” (Virk and McGregor 2018), there has been an apparent rise in cosmetic surgery to imitate the Kardashians’ bodies and a rise in both celebrities and non-famous white women who now participate

8. Khloe’s paternity was questioned, as audiences claimed she resembled OJ Simpson more than Robert Kardashian, while Kylie’s insecurity around her small lips led to lip fillers and potentially more surgeries at a young age.

in these exoticizing beauty practices associated with blackness. The existence of blackfishing perpetuates Eurocentric standards of beauty upon black women, as there now exists a supposed black woman to idealize. One critic of Hallberg stated that her fame stemmed from her performances of blackness and that it kept real black people from the spotlight (Rasool 2018).

Blackfishing relies on intense regimes of surveillance, but also reinforces the idea that blackness is something that can be put on for fun and then taken off for work or to be professional. But inviting surveillance is far more dangerous for black women, and on a larger scale for black communities. Surveillance promotes and spreads narratives of harmful stereotypes or pushes an agenda using black images. Responding to the increase of racist violence against Asian Americans connected with Covid-19 scapegoating, social media framed black Americans as instigators when only a small percentage of cases were black on Asian crime. The majority was white American violence, but the surveillance of blackness was weaponized to alter the conversation. In this same way, images of blackness can be altered and reused to promote narratives that further damage black communities. Despite the progress made in the US, through the civil rights movement and feminism, white sovereign entrepreneurial terror pervades the country. Whether the entrepreneurial terrorist is Donald Trump or the Kardashian family, their continued popularity and influence, despite controversies, signals the ongoing racial imbalance in the United States. The symbiotic relationship Tompkins scrutinized between miraculous white healing and enforced black debility and unfreedom has merely transitioned in the present: white healing extends into white access to beauty and power, and performative blackness invades spaces where a separation is no longer clear between those who are black and those who are blackfishing.

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