

## **The Commodification of Blackness**

By Rebecca Robinson

As a preface to this article, I would like to address the fact that I, a white person, am writing about black culture and identity; something that could easily come off as insincere (look at the middle-class white girl writing about race! She's so brave!). Though to ignore the position of privilege I am seated in would be an exercise in ignorance, but not using this platform, however limited, to spread awareness of the whitewashing of black culture would be the greater injustice. It is with that that I endeavour to present this sadly not new information, allowing readers of this article to call out the issue in the future.

The theft of black culture for white gain is an all-too-present issue. You don't have to look any further than recent celebrity and pop culture news to find an example of it. The ex-Little Mix singer Jesy Nelson has recently come under fire for blackfishing in the music video for her song 'Boyz'. The term blackfishing was coined by journalist Wanna Thompson and is used when non-black people change their appearance to look black. This includes, but is not limited to, darkening the skin via tanning, and wearing hairstyles pioneered by black women; both of which Nelson appears to have done in her music video. It is the participation in black culture without the willingness to deal with blackness; cherry picking the elements of a race and identity that you see fit for your own personal gain, whether that be to sell a song \*cough\* Jesy Nelson \*cough\* or to, in your eyes, make yourself prettier. It is a costume to adorn when it suits you and conveniently hang up when it's time to discuss issues of racism and the oppression of the people you are stealing from. It is the personification of white privilege. Though Nelson denies the claims, stating that she is merely lucky to tan easily and is wearing a wig that matches her natural hair, it is glaringly obvious that her skin is just as dark if not darker than Trinidadian rapper Nicki Minaj, who features in the video with her. This may seem like a trivial issue to some, given how often influencers and minor celebrities are in the tabloid spotlight for minor grievances, but to those people I say this; is it fair that a white person should be able to profit (literally, in Jesy's case) from the very things that lead to the murder of black people? Because that doesn't seem like a trivial issue to me. When a white person tans their skin to look mixed race, they are not seen as a threat to the police, when they wear cornrows, they are not less likely to get a job, and when they get plastic surgery and injections to mimic the features of black people, they are not less likely to get suitable health care. When the line is crossed from appreciation to appropriation, the issue arises. In the words of journalist Karen Attiah, "it is [the] obsession with blackness, and black culture – without black people."

Black people have obviously been calling out this subject since it was first brought to their attention, sadly but not surprisingly, to little effect. Wanna Thompson, who coined the term blackfishing, believes "It's always been prevalent ... Be it fashion, beauty or music. Black is cool unless you're actually black." And she is right. Although this racist cosplaying seems to have only recently come into the public eye, this does not mean it is a new issue. The double-edged sword of social media has no doubt facilitated the influx of white influences picking parts of black culture to utilise when it suits them and, ultimately, when it is profitable for them. If we once again take Jesy Nelson as an example; she has used black culture to promote her song and fit into an aesthetic that she thinks will be marketable, turning not only a culture but a race into a commodity. Welcome to the fiery pits of late-stage capitalism, everyone. Though it is also the age of social media that will facilitate its decline. It is arguably the most important tool in denouncing cultural appropriation and blackfishing, given the age demographic of people who participate in these. Gen Z is the crossover of the social media user-blackfisher Venn diagram. To denounce this act when seen on social media and to educate those who do not yet see the issue is to take a step in the right direction for allyship and accountability. The commodification of blackness is not merely a topic of discussion for black history month, it is something to be dismantled until it no longer occurs.