Level:	Grades 9 to 12
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Duration:	2 to 3 hours

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Who's Telling My Story?

This lesson is part of USE, UNDERSTAND & CREATE: A Digital Literacy Framework for Canadian Schools:
http://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/digital-literacy-framework.

Overview

In this lesson students learn about the history of blackface and other examples of majority-group actors playing minority-group characters such as White actors playing Asian and Aboriginal characters and non-disabled actors playing disabled characters. They consider the key media literacy concepts that "audiences negotiate meaning" and "media contain ideological and value messages and have social implications" in discussing how different kinds of representation have become unacceptable and how those kinds of representations were tied to stereotypes. Finally, students discuss current examples of majority-group actors playing minority-group characters and write and comment on blogs in which they consider the issues raised in the lesson.

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- learn about the history and implications of majority-group actors playing minority-group characters
- consider the importance of self-representation by minority communities in the media
- state and support an opinion
- write a persuasive essay

Preparation and Materials

Read *Analyzing Blackface* (Teacher's Copy)

Prepare to show the *A History of Blackface* slideshow and *Blackface Then and Now* video to the class

Copy the following handouts:

- *Analyzing Blackface*
- *Cripface*

Procedure

Begin by projecting the first two images from "A History of Blackface": Carlo Rota and Kevin McHale, from series currently on TV (2011). The first is a British actor of Italian descent who has made a career of playing Arabs (and Muslims, either implicitly or explicitly) and the second is an abled actor who plays the most prominent disabled character on television. Ask students why these portrayals are considered acceptable. Why is it acceptable for Arab, Muslim or disabled characters to be played by actors who are not members of those communities when it is not acceptable in the case of Black, Asian or Aboriginal characters? Introduce the idea that *audiences negotiate meaning* and ask why disabled, Arab or Muslim audiences might have different views of how acceptable this is from mainstream audiences (for example, mainstream audiences tended to view Kevin McHale's character as a positive one, while members of the disabled community saw him as much more problematic.)

Project the next two images: David Carradine and Iron Eyes Cody. Explain that each is best known for playing someone of a different ethnicity in the 1970s. Would this be acceptable today? Why or why not? Point out that in these cases it was not just the fact that the characters were being played by White actors that was a problem, but that these characters were usually extremely stereotyped as well. Do students think this might be an issue with the first examples? (For example, might Kevin McHale and Carlo Rota's characters be more likely to be stereotyped because the actors are not members of the same communities as their characters? Would a non-disabled actor be aware of what aspects of his character are stereotypical?)

Introduce the idea that *media contain ideological and value messages and have social implications* and point out that the Asian population of the United States grew substantially following the 1965 *Immigration Act*, and that many Aboriginals became politicized in the 1960s and 1970s as part of groups such as the American Indian Movement. How might these events have been connected to it becoming unacceptable for White actors to play Asian or Aboriginal characters?

Project the final image. Tell students that blackface was a popular entertainment in the United States in the 19th and early 20th centuries in which White men would play stereotyped Black characters using makeup. Explain that it gradually became unacceptable towards the beginning of the 20th century and ask students to speculate about why this happened and why it was ever acceptable in the first place. The period where it became unacceptable was when screen media (movies and TV) were introduced – does this mean that what was acceptable to an all-White audience on stage was not acceptable to a broader audience on a movie or TV screen?

Point out that members of visible minorities are often voiced by White actors in animation today – the title character on the *Cleveland Show*, for instance, or Apu on *The Simpsons*. Is that acceptable? Why or why not?

Distribute the handout *Analyzing Blackface* and show the short video *Blackface Then and Now* (http://www.teachertube.com/video/blackface-then-and-now-261591). Go through the handout with the class and have them analyze the effect of the blackface in each using the first chart. Note that while there are similarities – for example, in neither film is the White actor *actually* playing a Black character, but rather each is playing a White actor in blackface – the effect is very different:

- The makeup in *The Jazz Singer* does not actually make Jolson look like a Black person, but rather a cartoon based on stereotypes of Black people, while Downey Jr.'s makeup is fairly realistic (make sure students know that the makeup in the earlier film is not due to technical limitations: there was no attempt to make the effect realistic.)

- While Jolson's performance is not as badly stereotyped as many examples of blackface, it does have the clownish gestures and sentimentality for the Old South ("My heartstrings are tangled around Alabammy") associated with Black stereotypes of the period. Downey Jr.'s performance, especially his speech patterns, also draws on contemporary stereotypes of African-Americans.

- While both films make reference to the phenomenon of blackface, *The Jazz Singer* does not critique it in any way: in fact it celebrates it, making Jolson's blackface performance the climactic scene of the movie and portraying it as a heartwarming tribute to his character's mother. (Again, make sure students understand that this is not just a function of when the movie was made: blackface had already existed for nearly a hundred years, so there was definitely sufficient time and distance to critique it.) *Tropic Thunder*, on the other hand, actively critiques the practice of having White actors play characters of other races, particularly through the character of Alpa Chino (played by Brandon T. Jackson).

Finally, nothing in *The Jazz Singer* addresses the issue of limited opportunities for minority group actors in film (remind students that casting White actors as Hispanics, Aboriginals and Asians remained common for another **fifty years** after that movie was made), while *Tropic Thunder* raises both that issue ("They had one good part in it [the fictional movie being made] for a Black man") and the appropriateness of White actors playing Black characters.

Note: The handout Analyzing Blackface *is based on the article ""Academy Awards 2012: Putting Blackface in Context" by Marissa Lee. For more background on the topic, the original article is available at http://www.racebending.com/v4/ featured/academy-awards-2012-putting-blackface-context/. Historical background on the two films being analyzed is available at http://www.filmsite.org/jazz.html and http://www.salon.com/2008/08/25/blackface/.*

Explain to students that any example of cross-cultural casting can be analyzed using the same questions. This can help students understand why some casting decisions that seem superficially similar – for example, having White characters played by minority-group actors (as in some productions of Shakespeare, or the casting of Idris Elba as the Norse god Heimdall in *Thor*) – are fundamentally different from blackface and similar practices: they do not dehumanize White people, are not based on stereotypes of White people, do not reflect a historical practice of casting other groups as White characters and do not make a significant difference in the number of roles available for White actors. If students still have trouble understanding the difference between the two kinds of cross-casting, take a few minutes to do the *Unpacking Privilege* (http://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/unpacking-privilege) mini-lesson to demonstrate how taking roles away from groups that are *disadvantaged* in a media context is different from taking roles from groups that are *privileged*.

Distribute *Cripface* and have students read it and answer questions.

Take up the questions with the class and then read aloud what Carlo Rota said about playing a Muslim on TV shows like *Little Mosque on the Prairie*: "I apologized to my Muslim friends and told them that sometime soon there will be enough Muslim actors to play Muslim roles but, for the moment, they had to help me adopt the culture." Ask students:

- Is it fair to cast White, Christian, abled actors if there aren't enough community actors available? Why might producers use this as an excuse? (Point out that Bruce Lee was originally cast to play Carradine's role in *Kung Fu*, so it's not true that there were no Asian actors available, and that disability activists argue that there is no shortage of actors with disabilities.)

- Which is more important – that Arabs play Arabs or that Muslims play Muslims? Why? Is there a difference between cripface and practices like blackface or casting White actors as Asians, Aboriginals, etc.? If so, why? If not, why do we accept cripface but not these other practices?

- Actors often play characters who are significantly different from themselves such as aliens, members of the opposite sex or people from other times or places. What is the difference (if any) between this and "face" casting? (Point out to students that one problem with different kinds of "face" described in the article is that it tends to lead to stereotyped portrayals. Can actors or producers overcome the problem by doing more research?)

- Is it more important that writers and producers, rather than actors, come from the community being represented? For example, today Black characters are always played by Black actors, but usually in roles written, directed and produced by Whites. How often are Black characters stereotyped? Is it more important that all the actors on *Little Mosque on the Prairie* be Muslim, or that a significant number of the writers and producers are?

Evaluation task: Have students write a blog entry (or film a video blog entry) expressing an opinion on one of the issues raised in the lesson, such as:

- Is it fair to cast White, Christian, abled actors if there aren't enough community actors available? Why might producers use this as an excuse?

- Is there a difference between cripface and practices like blackface or casting White actors as Asians, Aboriginals, etc.? If so, why? If not, why do we accept cripface but not these other practices?

- Actors often play characters who are significantly different from themselves such as aliens, members of the opposite sex or people from other times or places. What is the difference (if any) between this and "face" casting?

- Is it more important that writers and producers come from the community being represented?

This can be done either with an online blogging platform such as *WordPress* (http://wordpress.org) or *Blogger* (http://www.blogger.com) or may be done as "paper blogs": blog entries are posted on oversized pieces of paper on classroom walls and then other students leave comments using sticky notes. Students are required to comment on at least five other students' blogs, either disagreeing with their peers or adding supporting details or arguments.

Analyzing Blackface (Teacher's Copy)

Not all "face" casting is unacceptable, but because of the history of blackface and related casting practices, as well as the limited opportunities for minority-group actors, it's important to look closely at each example. Key questions to ask are:

Does the portrayal dehumanize the group? For example, makeup that makes White actors look like a *caricature* of a particular race rather than representing them realistically.

Is the portrayal based on stereotypes about the group?

Does the portrayal critique or comment on blackface or similar issues? Even if it's done without using stereotypes, "face" casting always happens in a historical context. Does the portrayal recognize and confront that context?

Does the portrayal acknowledge the limited opportunities for minority-group actors? Even after blackface became unacceptable, Hispanic, Aboriginal and Asian characters were typically played by White actors, leading to a situation where those groups remain underrepresented in film and TV today.

	Al Jolson in *The Jazz Singer* (1927)	Robert Downey Jr. in *Tropic Thunder* (2008)	Kevin McHale in *Glee* (2009)
Does the portrayal dehumanize the group or mark them as inferior?	Yes	No	No
Is the portrayal based on stereotypes about the group?	Yes	Yes	Yes
Does the portrayal critique or comment on blackface or similar issues?	No	Yes	No
Does the portrayal acknowledge the limited opportunities for minority-group actors?	No	Yes	No

Analyzing Blackface

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Based on Marissa Lee's article "Academy Awards 2012: Putting Blackface in Context" at Racebending.com.

Cripface

People with disabilities may be the most under-represented group in mass media: although 12 per cent of Americans are considered to have some kind of disability, only 1 per cent of characters in the 2010-2011 TV season did.[1] (The same can be said for Canada, where 12.4 per cent of Canadians have a disability[2] but they are greatly underrepresented on TV as well.)[3]

Despite the very small number of characters with disabilities, nearly all of them are played by actors without disabilities. Cripface or "crip drag," refers to the casting of actors without disabilities to play characters with disabilities. The parallels to the terms "blackface" (in which White actors played stereotyped African-American characters) and "drag" (a tradition in which men play exaggeratedly feminine women, either imitating well-known actors and singers or creating original characters) show that the issue is not just that characters with disabilities are not being played by disabled actors but that they are usually very stereotyped characters as well.

One of the most high-profile portrayals of a person with a disability in recent years is Artie Abrams on *Glee*. The official *Glee* website description of the character reads: "Though an accident from childhood left Artie Abrams paralyzed from the waist down, he doesn't let his wheelchair hold him back from playing guitar, popping wheelies, beat-boxing, or playing *Dance Dance Revolution* with his hands. But his disability sets him apart from other kids, which sometimes makes him easy pickings for school bullies. … Artie's dream is to be a dancer, something he believes can never happen. Tina urges him to pursue spinal cord treatments, but he realizes that some dreams were never meant to come true." [4]

Reaction to the character has been mixed: in general, non-disabled viewers have tended to see him as a positive portrayal of a person with a disability, and *Glee* was given an award by the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences for exemplifying "television with a conscience." [5] Many disabled viewers, on the other hand, see Artie as an inaccurate, stereotyped character.

Artie is played by Kevin McHale, an actor who is not disabled. In addition, he embodies several common stereotypes: that persons with disabilities are only worthy of being admired if they "overcome" their disability; that persons with disabilities are automatically social outcasts; that persons with disabilities cannot participate in physical activities such as dancing, sports, and acting; and that the strongest emotion in the lives of persons with disabilities is a desire to not have their disability.

Of course, all of these stereotypes would be just as bad if Artie were played by a wheelchair user. It seems likely, though, that if he were played by a wheelchair user – or if someone on the production staff had a disability or was familiar with the disabled community – the character would not be so badly stereotyped. In the show Artie's dream to be a dancer can never come true, but in fact there are several traditions of wheelchair dancing, such as integrated dance and wheelchair ballroom[6], which a disabled actor might have known about and encouraged the producers to draw on.

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1. "Study finds more gay characters on network TV." Associated Press, October 2, 2010.
2. 2001 Census of Canada, Statistics Canada, 2001.
3. "Changing Channels: Improving Media Portrayals of Diversity." *Abilities*, Spring 2008.
4. "Kevin McHale as Artie Abrams." <http://www.fox.com/glee/bios/kevin-mchale/>
5. "'Glee' Among TV Shows With 'Conscience' For Highlighting Disabilities." <http://www.disabilityscoop.com/2010/03/18/tv-awards/7365/>

Glee producer Brad Falchuk has said that Kevin McHale was simply the best actor for the job.[6] That may well be, but it's a refrain that disabled actors have heard for a long time: that there aren't enough actors with disabilities to cast them when a role calls for a disability. But that simply isn't true, according to Gloria Castaneda, program director of the Media Access Office, a California state program that advocates for persons with disabilities in the entertainment industry. "There are very talented performers with disabilities... We just don't know what producers are thinking," she told the Associated Press.[7] There's no reason to think the Canadian entertainment industry is different: Joanne Smith, host of CBC's *Moving On* from 1997 to 2007, told *Abilities* magazine that "I was actually shocked when I spoke to some casting agents and some executive producers specifically about hiring people with disabilities, whether it be for broadcasting or for acting, and I had some people point-blank tell me they didn't want to hire people with disabilities." [8] Robert David Hall, best known as medical examiner Doctor Albert Robbins on *CSI*, has said "I think there's a fear of litigation, that a person with disabilities might slow a production down, fear that viewers might be uncomfortable…. [but] I've made my living as an actor for 30 years and I walk on two artificial legs." Similarly, shows such as *Breaking Bad* and *Private Practice* have employed actors with disabilities in regular cast roles – in both cases, playing characters who were not originally written as having disabilities.[9] Michael Patrick Thornton, a wheelchair user who has a regular role on *Private Practice*, says that he will be happy when actors with disabilities have the same opportunities as the non-disabled, in roles where "nobody ever mentions the chair." [10]

Over time, blackface and similar practices – such as casting White actors as Asians or Aboriginals – have become unacceptable. Will the same happen to cripface? As the American and Canadian populations get older on average, it may be that there will be more and more persons with disabilities who want to see themselves on the screen (of course, there aren't that many old people on TV either). What's certain is that until persons with disabilities are involved in how their stories are told in media – whether in front of or behind the camera – the stereotypes in cripface will not go away.

Questions

1. How was *Glee* seen differently by people with and without disabilities?

2. In what ways is the character of Artie a stereotyped portrayal of persons with disabilities?

3. Why does that article suggest that the character of Artie might be less stereotyped if persons with disabilities were involved in the production of the show?

4. What reasons are given for why producers are reluctant to hire actors with disabilities?

5. How important do you think it is that disabled characters be played by actors with disabilities? Why?

6. How important do you think it is that disabled actors be cast to play characters that do not necessarily have disabilities? Why? Is the answer different in different situations?

7. Return to the *Analyzing Blackface* chart and analyze Artie as a "cripface" portrayal.

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6. 'Proud Mary' Glee's Very Special Sham Disability Pride Anthem." http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/imr/2010/04/09/proud-mary-glee-s-very-special-sham-disability-pride-anthem

7. "*Glee* star Kevin McHale defends able-bodied casting choice" http://www.popeater.com/2009/11/11/glee-star-kevin-mchale-defends-able-bodied-casting-choice/

8. "Glee wheelchair episode hits bump with disabled." http://www.usatoday.com/life/television/news/2009-11-10-glee-wheelchair_N.htm

9. "Changing Channels: Improving Media Portrayals of Diversity."

10. "Glee wheelchair episode hits bump with disabled."

11. "Reclaiming Roles: Actors Play Beyond Disabilities" http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=126720020

Kevin McHale is best known for his portrayal of Artie, a wheelchair-using member of the glee club on the TV series "Glee." Unlike his character, McHale does not have any disabilities. With a small number of exceptions, disabled characters on television and in movies are rarely played by disabled actors.

Carlo Rota, a White actor born in England, is best known in Canada for the role of Yasir Hamoudi, an Arab and Muslim, on *Little Mosque on the Prairie*. Some actors have found successful careers as "chameleons," playing roles of widely differing ethnic origins.

David Carradine, a White actor, played half-Chinese character Kwang Chai Kane in the TV series *Kung Fu* – the only TV series in the 1960s to have an Asian lead character. (The role was originally intended for Chinese actor and martial artist Bruce Lee.)

IRON EYES CODY

Espera Oscar de Corti, better known as "Iron Eyes" Cody, was a White actor who made a career out of playing Aboriginal characters. His best known role was as the "Crying Indian" who appeared in the extremely influential anti-littering public service announcement *Keep America Beautiful*. Many if not most Aboriginal characters in film and on TV were played by White actors until the 1960s, though Cody was unusual in that he actually claimed to be Aboriginal in real life.
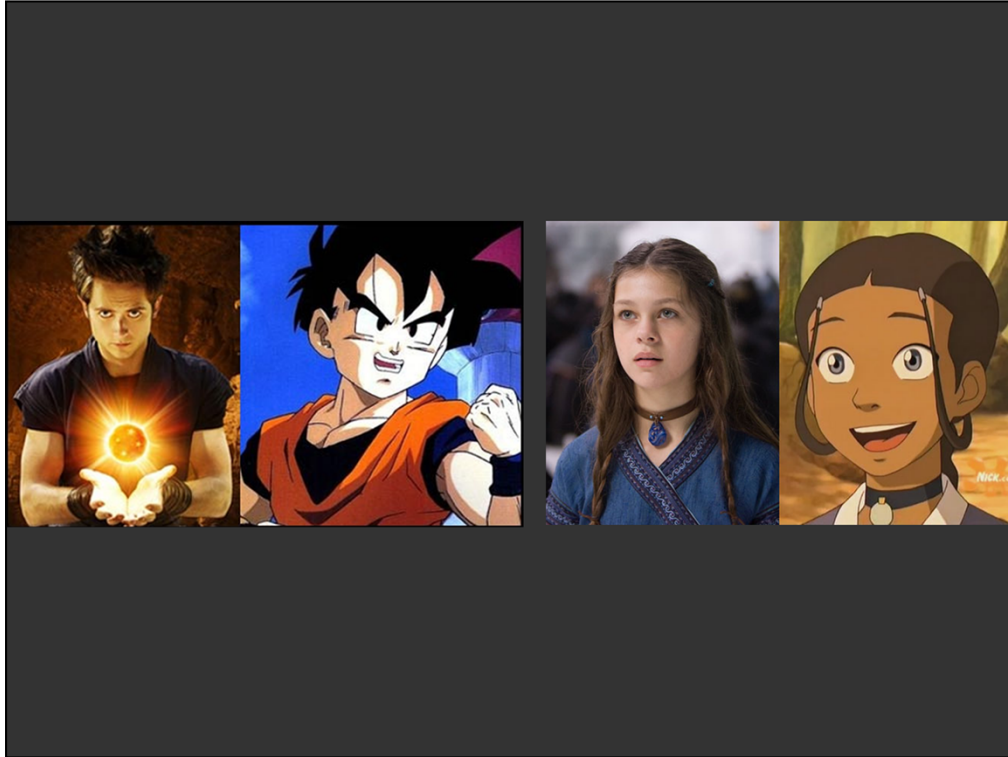
While White actors are less often cast in Asian or Aboriginal roles, the phenomenon of "whitewashing" – making minority characters White when adapting a TV show or movie from another medium – persists, as in the movies *Dragonball: Evolution* (2009) and *The Last Airbender* (2010).

While transgender characters have become more visible in TV and film, they are still most often played by cisgendered actors such as Jeffrey Tambor (in the TV show *Transparent*) and Eddie Redmayne (in the film *The Danish Girl*.)

"Blackface" was a popular genre of comedy that involved White actors who wore makeup to play heavily stereotyped Black characters. Though it was most popular in the 19th century, it remained common until the 1950s: the first movie with sound, "The Jazz Singer," was about a blackface performer.

A HISTORY OF BLACKFACE

IRON EYES CODY

Task Assessment Rubric: Blog/Vlog

	Learning Expectations	Achievement
Use Skills and competencies that fall under "use" range from basic technical know-how – using computer programs such as word processors, web browsers, email and other communication tools – to the more sophisticated abilities for accessing and using knowledge resources such as search engines and online databases and emerging technologies such as cloud computing.	*Community Engagement:* exhibit leadership as a digital citizen by communicating their opinion on a topic relevant to the lesson use digital media to be part of a community by commenting on other students blogs/vlogs *Making and Remixing:* communicate information and ideas effectively to multiple audiences using the blog/vlog formats participate in society through participating in an online conversation	Insufficient (R) Beginning (1) Developing (2) Competent (3) Confident (4)
Understand "Understand" includes recognizing how networked technology affects our behaviour and our perceptions, beliefs and feelings about the world around us. "Understand" also prepares us for a knowledge economy as we develop information management skills for finding, evaluating and effectively using information to communicate, collaborate and solve problems.	*Community Engagement:* understand how meaning is produced through multimedia (text, images, audio, video) and how culture is produced through the Internet and social media in particular show awareness of the issues relating to media representation of diversity *Making and Remixing:* use applications effectively and productively understand the potential of digital devices and resources for her/his schoolwork understand the different purposes and contexts of digital publishing understand how meaning is produced through multimedia (text, images, audio, video) and how culture is produced through the Internet and social media in particular show an understanding of the forms and techniques of the medium and genre: the chosen topic, issue and solution were clear the product displayed an insight into a topic and opinion	Insufficient (R) Beginning (1) Developing (2) Competent (3) Confident (4)

	Learning Expectations	*Achievement*
Create "Create" is the ability to produce content and effectively communicate through a variety of digital media tools. It includes being able to adapt what we produce for various contexts and audiences; to create and communicate using rich media such as images, video and sound; and to effectively and responsibly engage with user-generated content such as blogs and discussion forums, video and photo sharing, social gaming and other forms of social media. The ability to create using digital media ensures that Canadians are active contributors to digital society.	*Community Engagement:* make valuable contributions to the public knowledge domain by publishing and commenting on blogs/vlogs *Making and Remixing:* effectively apply the forms and techniques of the medium and genre: text or video was created with care and relevant to the topic at hand visual components were complementary to the text or audio text and graphics or images were effectively integrated	Insufficient (R) Beginning (1) Developing (2) Competent (3) Confident (4)