

A Year After Blackface: Where Are We Now?
A Mustang News Campus Climate Special Edition

A Senior Project
presented to
the Faculty of the Journalism Department
California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

In Partial Fulfillment
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Bachelor of Science

by

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ABSTRACT

The following is the introductory editorial I wrote for Mustang News' special edition newspaper entitled "A Year After Blackface: Where Are We Now? A Campus Climate Special Edition" (Fish, 2019). Though lengthy, it serves as an effective abstract for this research paper:

I'm Quinn Augusta Fish and I'm a journalism and ethnic studies senior at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. I am a white, cisgender, heterosexual, upper-middle class woman; most of which I knew nothing about before coming to Cal Poly. In the class structure that is America today, I exist in the second ring, just under white, cisgender, heterosexual men. Never in my life have I felt limited by any of my social identities nor have I experienced a stereotype, a profiling, or the loss of an opportunity. I carry more privilege than I will ever know.

I grew up in Alameda, California—an island off of Oakland—in a neighborhood where none of my neighbors looked like me. I didn't think about my own race until I was eight or nine, when I realized my cousins didn't look like me. My own parents, democratic Deadheads with college degrees, preached colorblindness, that all human beings are created equal. Though they'd never acknowledge it, in other words: All Lives Matter. It wasn't until I came to Cal Poly that I started to grasp the power and all-encompassing properties of Whiteness. It was not until I came to San Luis Obispo that I heard the N-word—hard "r"—and since then, I have heard it only in San Luis Obispo, four or five times. It wasn't until I came to San Luis Obispo that I heard Black people referred to not only as "Africans," but as "colored people" on more than one occasion. I have heard professors explain "reverse racism" incorrectly, implying that it does, in fact, exist. I have seen professors time after time call on students of color for their input on issues that vaguely

relate to their social identities. And all in all, I have seen students, staff and faculty act as inactive bystanders nine times out of 10.

In my time at Cal Poly, I have learned that racism thrives behind closed doors. With a population as wealthy and as white as the university is, it is no question why campus climate continues to exist in the way that it does. I've heard slurs and epithets and more racist jokes than I could ever have imagined hearing in the state of California. Though these problems are in no way unique to Cal Poly or San Luis Obispo in itself, they have a way of making themselves known here. It's not always our fault we've grown up in a society that has not taught us any better, but ignorance is no excuse. To blame ignorance for acts of racism, transphobia, sexism, homophobia, ableism, is to put the burden on the educator; it is on us to educate ourselves.

These are the conversations that need to be had.

In my role as Managing Print Editor for *Mustang News*, I felt the responsibility to use the newspaper as a medium for this conversation. The conversation on unity, on white supremacy, on the reality of today's climate, on using our voices to speak for those who have been silenced. As Cross Cultural Centers Lead Coordinator for Diversity Initiatives Beya Montero-Makekau reminded me, though this is the anniversary of a blatant racist incident on campus, every year is the anniversary of a racist incident that happened to someone on campus. Through all of the conversations that led to the production of this issue, I have learned so much, not only about campus and the issues that persist here, but about the resilience of those pushing day after day for the equity of everyone in the community, even those who do not look like them. Myself and the dedicated reporters who helped me put this issue together have spoken to so many students, staff

and faculty members who do not have the privilege of feeling at home, or even safe, on campus. Those of us who are lucky enough to have found a place that treats us well are often blissfully unaware of how the very same campus treats others.

My advice for people who look like me: listen more than you speak. Use your voice to amplify those of others. Educate yourself with the tools provided to you. Take The Social Construction of Whiteness (ES 381) and Intergroup Dialogues (PSY 304). Take it upon yourself to be educated; it is no one's responsibility but your own.

INTRODUCTION

On April 8, 2018, Kyler Watkins, a member of the Lambda Chi Alpha fraternity at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo (Cal Poly), wore blackface to a fraternity event. A photo of Watkins at the event surfaced and quickly spread throughout the community, sparking outrage at the predominantly white institution and within the community which both have a notorious history of “racially insensitive” events. The incident took place during the University’s PolyCultural Weekend, where cultural organizations on and around campus welcome prospective students of color to show what the University has to offer. The April 2018 blackface event led to protests, an investigation from the California State Attorney General and, ultimately, international news coverage. Cal Poly, a university known for its academics and gorgeous surroundings, garnered a tainted public image. Following the incident, there was an immediate indefinite suspension of all on-campus university greek life, i.e., Panhellenic Association (PHA) sororities and Interfraternity Council (IFC) fraternities. The University also spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on new hires devoted specifically to diversity and inclusion efforts, initiatives devoted to increasing diversity, and other efforts to assure students of minority populations felt safe on campus.

I was both a copy editor as well as a student earning undergraduate bachelor degrees in both Journalism (JOUR) and Comparative Ethnic Studies (ES) at the time that the image of Watkins surfaced. A majority of my ES and a good number of my JOUR courses centered around Blackness and Whiteness studies, with a focus on intersectionality and the effects of a range of issues on different communities. I was in the newsroom of Mustang News, the consumer-facing brand of the student-run media group at Cal Poly, Mustang Media Group, when

the news broke, and because I had seen Watkins before, I was able to identify him in the photo. *Mustang News* received the photo via email from an ES professor at the University and *Mustang News* was the first to identify Watkins by name. After we named the student, multiple other local, national and international outlets cited *Mustang News* for naming Watkins.

April 8, 2018 was the first weekend of the 2017-2018 Spring term. The following weeks' news coverage via *Mustang News* was non-stop in that protests, letters to the editor, a statement from the president of the University, an apology from Watkins, countless opinion pieces, and an investigation into the First Amendment continued for the duration of the academic year.

Starting in June 2018, as I finished my junior year and began to prepare for my fourth and final year of undergraduate studies, I stepped into the position of Managing Print Editor for *Mustang News*' weekly newspaper for the 2018-2019 academic year. With a passion for race studies and ethical, honest journalism, combined with the first-hand experience of the events of Spring 2018, for my senior project, I planned, prepared, wrote the cover story for, and executed a special edition *Mustang News* newspaper that hit newsstands April 9, 2019, titled *A Year After Blackface: A Campus Climate Special Edition.*” The 24-page special edition had a higher pickup rate percentage than any other paper in that academic year and revisited the question of the safety and security of minority students on campus (Appendix, 2). The purpose of the edition was to analyze what changes had been made and not made in the year following the incident and to delve into the University's issues in relation to race and minority student populations. Lastly, I wanted to create a piece of distributed media that gave a clear voice to those deeply affected by the incident: namely, students, staff and faculty of color. I enlisted a team of *Mustang News* journalists to help me execute a special edition in which every article, opinion piece, and

editorial related to campus climate or issues of diversity at Cal Poly. I created a submission tab on the *Mustang News* website for members of the community to write in to have an editorial in the special edition, of which I received several submissions. The link was sent out on *Mustang News*' Twitter, Instagram and Facebook accounts, as well as shared by many members of the staff. Three members of the *Mustang News* staff also submitted editorials reflecting on their own experiences of discrimination or viewpoints of life on campus.

In writing the cover story, "It's been one year since the blackface incident. Where is Cal Poly's campus climate now?" I spoke to nine different individuals affected and involved in the incident, who shared their stories for the piece. I also wrote a personal editorial introduction at the beginning of the edition that reflected my own stances as well as the purpose of the special edition.

The special edition won several awards, including Best Special Edition Newspaper and partially helped earn a Best Newspaper Pacemaker award from the Associated Collegiate Press, 2nd Place for Best Special Edition Cover from the Associated Collegiate Press, and Best Newspaper in Show at the 2019 Midwinter National College Journalism Convention. The cover illustration then won Best Illustration at the 2020 Midwinter National College Journalism Convention. Those who helped with the special edition received between \$100 and \$500 for their efforts via the Cal Poly Journalism Department as recipients of the SAGE Publishing Award.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the effects of a special edition newspaper on a college community?
2. How does the community react to a special edition newspaper?
3. What effects does a special edition newspaper have on the college media group?
4. How does highlighting the community's racist past affect the current coverage?
5. How does highlighting the community's racist past affect the community?
6. How does revisiting the university's racist past affect the discussion of diversity issues present-day?
7. How does coverage differ when subjects are a part of the minority versus the majority in a community?
8. How does a special edition newspaper affect the University's decision-making?

RESEARCH

In 2018, the City of San Luis Obispo was home to 47,446 persons with a demographic that was 84.2 percent white, (Census, 2019). With a total student population during the Fall 2017 term that was 54.9 percent white, 16.7 percent Hispanic/Latino and 0.7 percent African-American, Cal Poly was (and continues to be) the whitest public university in California, out of the 23 California State University campuses and the 10 University of California campuses (Institutional Research, 2018; Clark, 2018). In 2018, The USC Race and Equity Center ranked Cal Poly as one of the worst universities for Black students (Harper and Simmons, 2019). In 2017, the Education Trust ranked Cal Poly in the seven worst institutions for Latinx success (Education Trust, 2018). Adding that it's the third most expensive public university in California net-cost for low-income students and, based on *Mustang News*' prior research showing there's a negative correlation between the net cost for low-income students and the proportion of minority students on campus, I felt the need to focus on those in the community who were not a part of the majority throughout this incident (Matsuyama, 2018).

To start my project, I chose to focus on the students, staff and faculty who were not primary subjects in the original media coverage. Much of *Mustang News*' initial coverage of the event, as well as local and national news outlets, was on the IFC president, University President Jeffrey Armstrong, and on those making decisions on behalf of the University. I looked into finding parties on campus that were adversely affected: cultural clubs/organizations/centers on campus; those who made prominent efforts in addressing the University; and members of the University's administration. Those I interviewed are as follows, in random order:

INTERVIEWEES

- Olivia Gore, student
 - President of Cal Poly's Black Student Union
- Leilani Hemmings-Pallay, student
 - member of the Black Student Union, Students for Quality Education, the Queer Student Union, organizer of The Drylongso Collective
- Beya Montero-Makekau, staff
 - Lead coordinator for multicultural initiatives, Cross Cultural Centers
- Alejandro Bupara, student
 - Organizer, Students for Quality Education, a direct action social justice organization
- Jamie Patton, faculty member
 - Assistant Vice President for Student Affairs, Diversity and Inclusion
- Jozi De Leon, faculty member
 - Vice President and Chief Officer for Diversity and Inclusion
- Manmit Singh Chahal, student
 - President of Mustangs United club
- Jennifer Teramoto-Pedrotti, faculty member
 - College of Liberal Arts Associate Dean for Diversity and Curriculum

Kyler Watkins expressed via email that he was uninterested in cooperating with *Mustang News*' coverage.

After setting up interviews with each of my subjects, I looked into what each person would add to the story specifically. I asked questions (Appendix, 1) that pertained to their positioning in campus, the events that took place, and their involvement in the aftermath. The interview with Leilani Hemmings-Pallay was conducted over the phone, the interview with Dr. Terremoto-Pedrotti was conducted over email, and every other interview was conducted in person and took from 45 minutes to two hours.

For the rest of the newspaper, I enlisted the help of my fellow student journalists from *Mustang News* for their contributions and insights. The following list is of those who wrote articles for the project, in no particular order:

CONTRIBUTORS

- **Isabella Paoletto** (JOUR/ES): “The Cal Poly Experience: The University’s Most Recent Diversity Initiative”; “The Missing Minority: Latinx Students”; “Diversity Initiatives Explained: Where We Are Now and What’s Next for Cal Poly”
- **Cassie Garibay** (JOUR): “The Cal Poly Experience: The University’s Most Recent Diversity Initiative”; “Q&A with Jasmin & Heidi, a Conversation on Campus & Community Climate”
- **Austin Linthicum** (BUS): “Q&A with Jasmin & Heidi, a Conversation on Campus & Community Climate”
- **Aidan McGloin** (JOUR): “Freshmen Learn Pronunciation, Have Trouble Spelling Chumash Names”

- **Naythan Bryant** (JOUR): “Diversity in Athletics: More White than the University Itself”
- **Solena Aguilar** (ART): Cover design (inspired by international media coverage”
- **Isabel Hughes** (ENGL): “Cal Poly’s Timeline of Racism”
- **Michael Barros** (JOUR): “Meet Luke Francis Austin, an Artist Sparking Conversation About Race & Gender”
- **Lilly Leif** (ENGL): “Welcome Back, Lambda Chi; We Haven’t Forgotten”

I also reached out—both on my personal accounts and on Mustang News’ accounts—via Facebook, Instagram and Twitter and via email to different organizations on campus requesting editorial submissions with the following message:

“As a Journalism/Ethnic Studies student, my senior project is to put together a special print edition of *Mustang News* to run the second week of April centering on "A Year After Blackface." My goal is to look into what's changed, what hasn't, the status of campus climate, and where Cal Poly is today, as well as what the future looks like.

“I'm opening up the special edition for staff/faculty/students' personal testimonies/editorials/anecdotes on their experiences on campus/in the community, opinions on how campus climate can be addressed, or really anything else diversity/campus climate-related.

“I'm keeping it super open-ended to fit as many viewpoints as possible.

“If you or anyone else you know (even alumni) might be interested in sharing their story or voicing their opinion, here's the submission form.”

I received three submissions from *Mustang News* staff members and two submissions worthy of publishing from community members. They are as follows:

Mustang News Staff Members:

- **Cassandra Garibay** (News Editor): “Reporting on Diversity as a Latina at Cal Poly”
- **Prerna Aneja** (Sports Intern): “Being Brown in a Crowd of White”
- **Monique Ejenuko** (Diversity & Inclusion Editor): “From the Eyes of a Diversity and Inclusion Editor”

Community members:

- **Manmit Singh Chahal** (ES): “The Long Memory”
- **Jordan Pohl** (MAT): “A University’s Responsibility”

CAL POLY'S HISTORY OF RACISM

Historically, blackface refers to actors, Black and white, painting their faces with black paint to depict slaves and freed black people onstage during minstrel shows, which started in the mid-to-late-nineteenth century and lasted through the 1950s (Kaur, 2019). The practice created caricatures of African Americans used to mock and dehumanize the community.

To learn more about past events that occurred on and off campus in San Luis Obispo, I looked to *Mustang News*' past coverage. Special sections editor Isabel Hughes researched and created a timeline of events in the community that garnered media attention and/or displayed insensitive behavior towards minorities (Hughes, 2018). While events go further back than 2008, these were the most prominent events she found especially remarkable in Cal Poly's recent history:

- **October 2008** - A noose, Confederate flag and sign with racist and homophobic slurs found at the Crop Sciences House on campus
- **March 2011** - Racist flyer with "the final solution to the BLACK (sic) problem" posted in Robert E. Kennedy Library men's restroom
- **November 2013** - The Phi Sigma Kappa fraternity hosted a "Colonial Bros and Nava-Hos" themed party
- **November 2015** - Islamophobic, transphobic, racist and sexist message written on the Cal Poly College Republicans' "Free Speech Wall"
- **November 2015** - SLO Solidarity organizer Matt Klepfer (student) received a death threat from Charles Bird, including an anti-Semitic slur

- **November 2016** - Islamophobic, transphobic, racist and sexist messages written on the Cal Poly College Republicans' "Free Speech Wall"
- **February 2017** - Adult man passed out flyers with neo-Nazi sentiments outside of Robert E. Kennedy Library on campus
- **June 2017** - A photo of the Alpha Gamma Rho fraternity wearing culturally appropriating outfits was posted on Old Row's public Twitter account
- **January 2018** - Hateful flyers posted around campus including racist statements and "statistics" about African Americans concerning domestic violence, welfare, homicides and assault
- **April 2018** - Lambda Chi Alpha members hosted "gangster"-themed party; Kyler Watkins wore blackface

LIMITATIONS

As a heterosexual, cisgender, upper-middle class white woman, the most obvious limitation is that I can never truly comprehend or even understand the experiences of any of the student, staff, or faculty members of color I spoke to. No matter how many questions I asked or how much they explained to me their exact feelings or experiences, the most I could do was try my best to put what they told me into accessible, digestible words and information. My primary audience was white people, as that's the clear majority of the community, and my goal was to put the subjects' experiences into words that would make my white audience understand what they had experienced. Pickup rates also may have been inflated because they were passed out during Open House 2019 as well as at *Mustang News* events and around campus.

SUMMARY

Overwhelmingly, my findings opened my eyes to many realities—and answered a good chunk of my research questions. Some questions, however, were clearly impossible to answer. While the special edition newspaper received far more positive feedback than any other newspaper I put together for the 2018-2019 academic year, I was also in charge of the newspaper. We may very well have gotten negative feedback, but professors, advisors, administrators and other students only came to me with high, positive feedback.

Though difficult to assess, I would like to say that the newspaper served as a conversation starter for community members. I had upwards of 20 people email me, message me, tag me on Twitter, or strike up a conversation on campus regarding the edition, its implications, and how important it was to student journalism and the community at large. The issue was brought up in each of my ES courses and JOUR courses that quarter and, I'm hoping, in other classes that I wasn't a part of. The issue was passed out during Cal Poly's Open House Showcase and Farmer's Market, both of which have arguably the most foot traffic of any University events in a single year. Not only were prospective students and their parents eager to learn about student media, but they were eager to learn about the history of the University, though most of them were previously aware of the blackface incident.

One of my goals with the special edition was to change the perception of *Mustang News* and that of our coverage. Around campus, the media group and our platforms were somewhat notoriously known for being insensitive and only coming to students of color for responses during diversity-related crises, such as when new administrative diversity plans were enforced or when racist slurs were posted up somewhere on campus. After the special edition newspaper hit

the stands on April 9, 2019, I personally delivered a copy to each student, staff, faculty and administration member I had interviewed, thanking them for their cooperation and later asking them for their thoughts and feedback on the piece. Every person I interviewed gave me positive feedback on the articles and the edition itself, noting for some that it changed their perception of *Mustang News* and our coverage. Based on this feedback, we tried to target other underrepresented groups on campus in the rest of our coverage for the year, including, but not limited to: transfer students, undocumented students, trans students, and students with disabilities.

The most significant artifact I learned from this project was how truly privileged I am, and how lucky I was to enjoy my time at Cal Poly. Furthermore, the existence of racism and prejudice on campus is nowhere near extinct. Each person I interviewed, all people of color, told me they would not be surprised if an incident similar to Watkins' blackface happened tomorrow. Not only that, but each of the students I spoke to said that they *expected* a similarly racist incident to happen in the near future, with Leilani Hemmings-Pallay citing, "It's the norm. It's expected." As the students, staff and faculty of color shared their experiences with me, on and off campus, about the prejudice they had experienced, it opened my eyes to the realities of not looking like everyone else. Not only that, but about how much I take for granted in my daily life.

CONCLUSION

While there were few aspects of my research that were quantifiable, I'm incredibly proud of the work my team did and the mark it left on the community. Mustang Media Group, being a group of student voices at Cal Poly, a predominantly white institution, should lead as an example to other universities in terms of their coverage. By centering the minority voices within the edition, this is a practice that isn't often taught outside of diversity and inclusivity journalism. It's important to highlight the minority voices in the community not only to improve relationships with minoritized groups, but to be able to have representation of all in what's known as *the media*. The more voices and groups are presented by media outlets, the more representative and more accurate their coverage. It can be somewhat difficult to find voices of those in minority groups for coverage as student-journalists, especially at such a white university and when there's already a bias against your outlet and numerous groups and organizations aren't willing to cooperate, but it's up to student-journalists themselves to improve this. Sometimes, you have to take "no" as an answer if it means it'll be a resounding "yes" in the future. Journalism courses should hone in on how to build relationships with the community and different sources, highlighting how it will in turn improve not only the coverage, but the community's perception of the coverage.

RECOMMENDATIONS

If *Mustang News*, or any other student media group for that matter, were to try a type of special edition like this again, I would recommend implementing different ways to measure the success of the piece. While this was solely a senior project for me and a special edition for the

rest of my team, I do wish we had incorporated some kind of survey before and after the edition about the perception of our coverage, both from the news staff and the community. If we had asked questions about our coverage before and after April 9, 2019, I am curious whether people would have reported a changed perception of *Mustang News* and Mustang Media Group as a whole. I also would have liked to find more ways of measuring print success than simply through pickup rate. If we could have factored in the fact that papers were handed out at multiple event with high foot traffic, the issue was viewed online as a whole project, and these are all different factors in the issue's true "pickup rate."

I do hope that Mustang Media Group continues to raise the bar in student journalism with award-winning content and out-of-the-box coverage.

Thank you so much for taking the time to read my research, I do hope you find the time to read the online edition of "A Year After Blackface: Where Are We Now? A *Mustang News* Campus Climate Special Edition" in its entirety at issuu.com.

APPENDIX

1. Interview Questions

- Do you remember where you were when you heard of the (Watkins) blackface incident?
- What was your first reaction?
 - What was the first thing you did?
 - How did it feel?
 - Were you surprised?
- What did the immediate aftermath look like?
 - How did your social identities influence the way you felt/reacted?
 - What did self care look like in this time?
- Tell me about your involvement with the aftermath of the incident.
- How do you feel the campus climate has changed since the event?
- What does the future of campus climate look like to you?
- What do you feel can be done to change the state of campus climate?
 - Can campus climate be fixed?
- Thoughts on Cal Poly Experience (CPX)?
- Are there any parties not pulling their weight?
- What would you say to a student who feels unsafe on campus because of their social identities?
- What do you think allyship looks like on campus?
 - What does the future of allyship look like on campus?
 - How can students become better allies?
 - Would you recommend cal poly to other people of color?

2. Mustang News Distribution: On-Campus Newsstands

Newspaper title	Date on stands	Total Read (out of 4,500)	Pickup Rate
Week 1: Title IX Verdict	4/2/2019	2,988	66.4%
Week 2: Year After Blackface	4/9/2019	3,496	77.69%
Week 3: STDs on the Rise	4/16/2019	3,189	70.87%
Week 4: Ripped from the Record	4/23/2019	3,088	68.62%
Week 5: Cal Poly Marked their Vote	4/30/2019	3,117	69.27%
Week 6: Branding Backlash	5/7/2019	3,183	70.73%
Week 7: Finding Space for Prayer	5/14/2019	3,149	69.98%
Week 8: Hormone Replacement Therapy	5/21/2019	3,202	71.16%
Week 9: Where do Caps and Gowns go?	5/29/2019	3,038	67.51%
Week 10: The Most Diverse Incoming Class	6/4/2019	2,997	66.6%
Week 11: Year Rewind	6/11/2019	NO DATA	NO DATA

Data provided by Mustang News Distribution Manager, Jasen Journeycake.

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