On Thursday morning Lisa R. Pruitt pulled out the 1985 yearbook she’d edited as an undergraduate at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. She wanted to see if any students appeared in blackface.

Quite honestly, Pruitt said, she couldn’t remember. She paged through the tome and couldn’t find any, but wouldn’t have been surprised if she had.

Pruitt, a professor of law at the University of California at Davis, said that back then she and her white classmates weren’t sensitized to the overt racism of blackface. Now, Pruitt, like many others, is re-examining her yearbook and rethinking the images memorialized in its pages.
What has become — as one scholar put it — the “great college-yearbook reckoning” arose after racist images from Ralph S. Northam’s 1984 medical-school yearbook were posted online last week. A photo on the Virginia governor’s page shows one person in blackface and another person wearing Ku Klux Klan apparel.

Northam, a Democrat, admitted to wearing blackface in the 1980s but has denied that he’s in the photo. Shortly after, Mark Herring, Virginia’s Democratic attorney general, admitted that he too had donned blackface in the 1980s.

Since then, Twitter has been aflame with racist images plucked from college yearbooks. Scholars and students want people to view the images not as jarring relics of the distant past, but as reminders of the entrenched cultures of racism that have persisted at American colleges for well over a century.
‘Racism on Full Display’

In a viral tweet the editor of NC Insider, a North Carolina news service, said he had flipped through the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s 1979 yearbook to kill time. He found a photo of what appears to be two fraternity brothers dressed as Klansmen and miming the lynching of another student, who’s wearing blackface. Another photo shows two students in blackface embracing.

(The photos “are abhorrent,” Joel Curran, Chapel Hill’s vice chancellor for university communications, said in a written statement. “That kind of behavior has no place on our campus, now or then.”)

Many other images popped up, too. At the University of Mississippi, Chi Omega sorority sisters performed in blackface at the 1969 “Christmas Sing Song.” At the University of Virginia, a group of white men in blackface wielded sharpened sticks and shields in 1958, The Daily Progress reported. At George Washington University, two students grinned in blackface for the “May Day Minstrel.”

Flip through just about any 1970s and 1980s yearbook from a Southern university, and “you’ll find blackface, lots featuring frats and sororities,” one archivist tweeted. “Racism on full display.”

But the images shouldn’t be seen as aberrations. It’d be a mistake, scholars and students say, to divorce the yearbook photos from other pervasive racial rituals, and symbols, that were and are prevalent on college campuses.

At Ole Miss, the whole history of blackface is embedded in Greek life, said James M. Thomas, an assistant professor of sociology. In the 1960s and 70s, Greek students would put on blackface while re-enacting scenes from Gone With the Wind. Students used to “sell off” cheerleaders in what resembled a slave auction, he said in an email, and to re-enact the assassination of Abraham Lincoln in the dining halls.

From Thomas’s perspective, Greek life at Ole Miss isn’t unique in its racist foundation. Fraternities “were intended to insulate networks of white affluence,” he said. Maintaining those networks always upholds racial barriers, he said.
Tamiya Troy, a sophomore at Chapel Hill, said she hadn’t been shocked when she saw the UNC yearbook photos on social media. None of the other black students she knows on the campus were either. Given the university’s prolonged battle over Silent Sam, a monument to Confederate soldiers that formerly stood on the campus, Troy said she has trouble believing its response to this latest controversy.

“I don’t see how it can be said that there was no place for this on campus,” she said, “when there are several buildings on campus named after individuals who owned slaves.”

**To Claim ‘Racial Innocence’**

The siege of blackface yearbook photos isn’t surprising to scholars who study race, racism, and education.

Andre M. Perry, a fellow at the Brookings Institution, relied on yearbooks to research the bigoted customs of fraternities and sororities. In a 2015 column that he recirculated this week, Perry wrote that college campuses “openly recorded these customs for white students to cherish in perpetuity.”

He chronicles the history of blackface at the University of Maryland at College Park. For example, in 1927 students in blackface rode in a horse-drawn buggy on May Day. A 1956 yearbook caption reads: “Southern belles and somber blackfaces enhance the KA [Kappa Alpha] contribution to the Homecoming float brigade.”

Fraternity Row, Perry wrote, is the most segregated area on many campuses, so “we shouldn’t be shocked” by its racist traditions.
Other scholars have pointed out how the popularity of minstrel shows decades ago contextualizes those yearbook photos. Racism doesn’t manifest itself in hatred alone. It’s reflected in the pleasure that white people, including college students, take in mimicking and mocking other races.

Blackface minstrelsy “was the most influential and popular genre of American popular music during the 19th century,” W. Fitzhugh Brundage, a professor of history at UNC, wrote for the New York Daily News. Millions of amateur blackface shows took place from the Civil War to the civil-rights era, Rhae Lynn Barnes, an assistant professor of history at Princeton, posted on Twitter.
The use of blackface in social life led many white Americans to naïvely believe they were learning authentic black culture, Barnes said. “In reality, they were learning racist coon songs, racist jokes in dialect, and white-supremacy ideology.”

In the 1980s, fraternities and sororities at primarily Big Ten colleges saw an “explosion” of blackface minstrelsy at galas, and began holding mock slave auctions, said Davarian L. Baldwin, a professor of American studies at Trinity College in Connecticut.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Greek students would put on blackface at private and semiprivate induction ceremonies. Then came what were called “pimps and hoes” parties, at which white people would wear big, furry hats, long coats, and bright colors, and say things like “thug life” and “ghetto fabulous,” Baldwin said. More recently white students started wearing blackface for Halloween.

Blackface is more than just the act of changing a person’s appearance, Baldwin said. While in blackface, white people adopt behavior that’s stereotypical of black people. They feign promiscuity, ignorance, and laziness, he said, all while claiming their outfits aren’t really about race.

Because white people, and white college students, constantly adjust how they perform in blackface, Baldwin said, they’re able to claim “racial innocence” while perpetuating harm.

**Restitution**

After a “dumpster fire” of a week for the black community in Virginia, Francesca Leigh-Davis needed some light.

Leigh-Davis, a community activist in Richmond, began talking with a few other people about an idea. What if they could fund an effort by students at historically black colleges and universities in Virginia to review all of the yearbooks for the state’s elected officials, and publish the results?

With little sleep but lots of hope, they launched an online fund-raising campaign. On Thursday they watched the donations roll in. As of Thursday evening, they’d raised $2,055.

The goal, Leigh-Davis said, is to pay some form of restitution to the black community for the harm that has been caused. Students will be paid $25 an hour to comb through yearbooks so that “we don’t find ourselves in this situation” again, she said.
“This has been a week filled with tears and sadness,” she added, “and not very good feelings about the state of Virginia.”

The new effort, she said, is something positive that the community could “hold and cradle and love.”

Terry Nguyen contributed reporting to this article.

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