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When I was 10 years old, we traveled from Colorado to New Jersey to visit relatives at Christmas time. We did a host of a variety of things. I actually got to see the original cast in "The Wiz" and did a lot of sightseeing. But one of my favorite moments was to stay up late at night and wait till everyone else had gone to bed, and then I would sneak downstairs to watch television. A host of old movies that I probably had no business watching, such as "Bonnie and Clyde" and "Oklahoma," that was a little OK. But I remember one evening coming across a show. It was an old movie, and it must have been "White Christmas" or "Holiday Inn" or that type. But it was a musical. And I started watching, and then they started to do this musical scene, and I noticed I saw Bing Crosby in blackface. And I was confused. I couldn't quite understand what the blackface had to do with the singing and dancing. That was my introduction to blackface minstrelsy.

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Blackface minstrelsy originated in New York, and not the South as a lot of people would think, in the 1830s. It was an incident where white actors would blacken their faces with burnt cork, paint on bright red lips, exaggerate the whites of their eyes and put on a tightly coiled wig to create caricatures of African Americans on the American stage.

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The typical minstrel show was a parody of Black culture, song and dance and speech, interspersed with stump speeches, jokes, musical interludes and theatrical skits. The cast included a roster of recurring characters. The interlocutor acted as the emcee. You had Mr. Tambo and Mr. Bones as the end men. Then you also had characters like the clownish slave Jim Crow, which was also the name of the Jim Crow laws that we knew in the American South. Or the maternal mammy, a hypersexualized wench; an arrogant dandy, Zip Coon; and the lazy, childish Sambo.

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The caricatures were often brutal, but not to the white audiences who laughed at the antics of the illiterate slaves as they sat secure in their own superiority. The image of the dancing, simple-minded buffoons captured the public's imagination and spread across the country like wildfire.

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Blackface minstrelsy grew to be the most popular form of American entertainment in the 19th century. Abraham Lincoln and Mark Twain spoke highly of the American minstrel show,

applauding the characterizations and the source of its humor. But just as it entertained, it also dehumanized the subjects of its ridicule, leaving the abolitionist Frederick Douglass to describe blackface minstrels as “the filthy scum of white society who have stolen from us a complexion denied them by nature.”

03:07

Ironically, after the Civil War, African Americans forged their own careers on the professional stage. The route to success often meant appropriating the mask that was used to mock them. White audiences also embraced Black performance in their local communities. These amateur minstrels used instructional guides that provided them with jokes, routines, songs and costumes they needed to put on their own shows. Such was the habit of politicians, fraternal orders, colleges, high schools and community performances, who carried on this tradition well into the 20th century.

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The professional minstrel show left an indelible imprint on the American psyche. The images and racial stereotypes that continue to circulate in American society on sheet music, magazines, books, vaudeville, theater, film, television, radio, records and all kinds of formats. These stereotypes were a powerful reinforcement of the ideas of white supremacy and Black inferiority.

04:19

The news headlines of the last few months have shown us that the legacy of blackface minstrelsy continues to haunt us. In a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, they found that one in three Americans say that blackface is always or sometimes OK if it's used in a Halloween costume. So let me ask this question. What is the appeal of darkening one's skin in order to impersonate someone of a different race? Blackface minstrelsy was born out of the realities of slavery and racial segregation, and its continual reappearance echoes the pain and suffering felt by Black people whose bodies and cultures were presented as strange and grotesque. It is a persistent reminder of the racism and prejudices that bred its very existence. The way it infiltrated society is a clear example of how deeply ingrained racism is in this country. And the racial subjugation embodied by blackface minstrelsy -- and perpetuated through a continuum of its history -- is a form of aggression, a psychic wound that refuses to heal. Racial impersonation of any form cannot escape this legacy.

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So it's time to shift the power of representation, to develop more expansive narratives about the rich complexity of who we are as human beings. Acknowledging and recognizing blackface for

what it is and what it symbolizes is a step in the right direction. Educating ourselves on how stereotypes reinforce racist ideologies is another. Success in either case depends on an honest self assessment of our social and cultural biases and how they came to be. The legacy of blackface minstrelsy is our shared history and requires all of us to take collective responsibility in dismantling its power to oppress and humiliate.

06:24

The next time you're confronted with someone in blackface or see a racist stereotype, tell me: What will you do?

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Thank you.

06:35

(Applause)