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The Kardashians: citizens of surplus

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ABSTRACT

This article engages with the manufacture/purchase of feminine beauty, especially via cosmetic surgery, U.S. citizenship, and prosperity Christianity. It aligns the Kardashians' form of capitalist beauty with their Christian rhetoric in context of their uptake of 'surplus citizenship'. I argue that prosperity Christianity together with certain aesthetic body modifications reveal a contemporary version of U.S. citizenship that speaks of entrepreneurial self-enhancement, national belonging, and affluence. I show that this 'new' type of citizenship is rooted in deeply racialised practices and processes. A case study – the rise and fall of the so-called 'Brazilian butt lift' (BBL) – is offered in order to demonstrate these ideas.

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Introduction

Celebrity studies has engaged with the Kardashians in various ways, for example, in relation to postmodernism (Barron 2018), gender (Brady 2016), body modifications (Jones 2017) and motherhood (Tsaliki 2019). The discipline takes the Kardashians seriously, noting that they function 'as the ultimate signifier of excessive, shameless celebrity' (Ingleton and York 2019, 372; also; Englund 2023, 3) and that 'no other family seems to so readily embody the deliberate curating of self for the lenses of the world's media' (Brady 2016, 115). Their fame and wealth have risen exponentially since their first reality television programme, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* (KUWTK; E! Ray 2007–2021) and others, notably *The Kardashians* (TK; Hulu 2022–), alongside lucrative businesses in fashion and makeup. The two richest sisters, Kim (1980–) and Kylie (1997–), have estimated net worths of \$1.7B (Forbes 2024) and \$680 M (Forbes 2023) respectively. In 2023, Kim was on *Fortune's* list of 100 most powerful women (Fortune Magazine 2023) and in 2024 Kylie was the fifth most followed person on Instagram worldwide (Duarte 2024). TK is the most viewed unscripted television series ever (Fitzgerald 2023). Other players here include mother Kris (1955–) and sisters Kourtney (1979–), Khloe (1984–) and Kendall (1995–).¹

The Kardashians are slippery cultural objects/subjects, transforming endlessly: modifying bodies and faces, starting new businesses, adopting emerging social media, and morphing through relationships, marriages, divorces, and children. One persistent strand beneath this constant change is prosperity Christianity, also known as 'prosperity

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theology' or 'prosperity gospelism': 'a transdenominational doctrine that emphasizes that God grants material prosperity . . . to those who have enough faith' (Schieman and Hyun Jung 2012, 738). Prosperity Christianity goes hand-in-hand with entrepreneurial self-enhancement, aligning with capitalist imperatives of growth. In this article, I argue that the Kardashians represent a form of citizenship that centres wealth-building and production of bodily beauty, underscored by prosperity Christianity. By doing so, I aim to demonstrate how the Kardashian exploitation of 'surplus citizenship' enhanced their fortunes and status.

I begin by outlining my multi-modal methodology. Following this, I offer a vignette from one of the Kardashian TV programmes, and their own version of their 'genesis', to demonstrate the importance of prosperity Christianity to their brand. I then provide a conceptual discussion of surplus citizenship in relation to other forms of citizenship. Finally, I offer a case study of one of the cosmetic surgeries that some of the family have allegedly undergone, the so-called 'Brazilian butt lift' (BBL). My argument is that a Kardashian brand of US citizenship combines entrepreneurial self-enhancement, national belonging, and affluence. Noting that they are white but have often played with racial hybridity, I argue that their citizenship is rooted in racialised practices including cultural appropriation.

Methodology: multi-modal media and bodies as media

Following media scholars Theo van Leeuwen and Anne Cranny-Francis, my methodology is critical discourse analysis (CDA) with a focus on multi-modal communication. Van Leeuwen explains that multi-modal CDA recognises that 'contemporary written language cannot be adequately understood unless we look . . . also at images, layout, typography and colour' (van Leeuwen 2014, 281). Since 2007 the Kardashians have appeared in reality television, social media – notably Instagram, Kim's 'home turf' (Corey 2022, n.p.) – documentaries, live appearances, and have authored books (memoir, fiction, coffee-table, fitness, and inspirational). Their celebrity is entrepreneurial: diversified through products and genres and 'mediated across [digital] platforms on a global scale' (Hamad 2018, 46–47). Thus, no single mode of textual analysis suffices in analysing them. Cranny-Francis argues that ' . . . the study of multi-modal texts . . . enables us to discuss the meanings generated by a specific modality but also by the interaction of modalities' (2005, 66). I draw on modalities that are visual, audio-visual, digital, and/or text-based. Archive materials deployed include a published memoir, transcribed excerpts from KUWTK and TK, posts from Instagram, X (Twitter), and Facebook, and texts from mainstream media including websites, popular articles, and YouTube videos.

However, there is yet another form of mediated communication that is central to Kardashian texts: their bodies. Feminist scholars in particular have paid much attention to Kardashian bodies, focusing on representations of and discourses around their workouts (Barron 2021), clothing (Church Gibson 2018; Wissinger 2016), cultural appropriations (Sastre 2014), and cosmetic surgeries (Whitney 2023; Jones 2017). On screens, they appear flawless: curvaceous, 'thick-thin' or 'slim-thick' (Ringrose, Tolman, and Ragonese 2019, 80), enhanced via surgery, gym work and dieting, and made camera-ready by 'glam squads' of stylists, hairdressers, and makeup artists (Parham 2022). Once outliers – as I show below – in terms of normative and ideal beauty standards, the Kardashians are

now quintessential representatives of new and yet always changeable aesthetics of mainstream global beauty (Church Gibson 2018; Jones [Forthcoming a](#)). Kardashian bodies carry messages and content (see Monteverde 2016; Cashmore 2019): they *are* media. While the vignette below does not mention bodies, the visuals are always-already about facial and bodily modifications that have been intimately scrutinised and tracked by audiences over nearly two decades.

Winged deities

An aeroplane engine hums over a black television screen. Slowly, runway lights are revealed. A private jet idles on the tarmac, passenger stairs illuminated and cabin windows shining through the darkness. A cutaway shows a carpet into which ‘Kim Air’ is woven. Kris sits in a luxurious lounge room and says in the Kardashian confessional² style (Beaver 2024, 6): ‘It’s been a rough week and just really hard on everyone’. A black car speeds towards the plane. Kim appears in her own confessional, wearing a skintight top that many viewers will recognise as part of her SKIMS™ label, with full makeup and long glossy hair. Her breasts are full but her body is thinner than it has appeared in previous seasons of the show, her face less mobile and lips plumper: ‘This was just a really really shocking way to start the new year’. The plane begins to taxi. Khloe reveals, in yet another confessional, what has happened: ‘Really sadly Tristan’s mom passed away suddenly and you know ever since then it’s just been really hard and tough’. Tristan is Khloe’s ex-partner, father of her two children. Like Kim, Khloe is in full makeup with long shiny hair. Her face is also somewhat immobile, lips plump, the operated nose tiny.³ Kim continues:

Tristan found out that his mom had had a heart attack and um you know it shook up his entire world. And so, of course, we drop everything and we go to Toronto. Like, uh, it’s just not even a question, like, I’ll be there.

Engines rev as Tristan appears, inside the plane with Kris, Kim, and Khloe, saying: ‘Thank you guys so much from the bottom on my heart, and, really, it means a lot’.

We learn that they are going to collect Tristan’s youngest brother, Amari, who lives with a severe form of epilepsy and uses a wheelchair. Khloe tells Kim: ‘Seriously, you were and are a little angel’. And Kris says in confessional:

Thank God for that plane . . . Tristan has definitely made some mistakes and he’s definitely messed up, but at the end of the day, he’ll always be part of our family, and we will be there for him no matter what. Making sure Amari’s good. That’s the mission.

Regular watchers of TK and KUWTK bring to this scene (Jones 2023a) historical knowledge covering years of Kardashian careers, cultural appropriations, romances, births, scandals, cosmetic surgeries, etc. Before analysing how the scene connects to prosperity Christianity and beauty, I will outline two key historical contexts. Firstly, Tristan’s infidelities during his relationship with Khloe which have been well documented, positioning him as something of a villain in Kardashian narratives (Lutkin 2023). In 2018, Kim mimed to camera a throat-slitting action behind his back (Marino 2018). That Kris, Kim, and Khloe are now travelling with him is intriguing, until Kris makes it clear that although

he has ‘definitely made some mistakes’, he is a forgiven sinner. Thus, the trio performs angelic care and compassion; we might imagine them as the theological virtues Faith, Hope and Charity, or the Christian triad of the three Marys. Phoebe Kaufman has noted that

The Kardashians . . . are deep believers in the Christian God. In particular, the first generation of sisters—Kourtney, Kim, and Khloe—note their religious allegiance constantly, from their Instagram posts to the bedazzled crosses swaying from their necks and their serious invocations of Jesus in times of strife. (Kaufman [forthcoming](#))

In this scene, they are presented as good Christians who *literally* fly to the rescue. This becomes overt when Khloe tells Kim ‘Seriously, you were and are a little angel’.

Secondly, Kardashian watchers bring context around Kim’s rivalry with Kourtney. The scene closes a season in which Kourtney has accused Kim of unsisterly and selfish behaviour, highlighted by the line ‘It feels awful that my sister used my wedding as a business opportunity. She chose the money over me’ (Jones [2023b](#)). Notably, Kourtney is not on the plane. The scene is thus part of a careful reframing of Kim not just as sisterly but as saintly: forgiving and helping a man she had previously wished dead. This is classic public relations image repair action (Benoit [1997](#)) which is nothing new for the Kardashians, particularly Kim, who

. . . has made significant efforts to break out of the mould created by the leaked sex tape [that started her career] and her image as a sex symbol and fashion icon . . . through her efforts to study law and her work for prison reform in the United States. (Englund [2023](#), 11)

The ‘Kim Air’ plane is visually coded as light in the darkness and as a powerful maternal container. It is a metaphor for Kim, who takes symbolic centre stage in a narrative about someone else’s death, someone else’s grief. She demonstrates this move discursively when she says ‘. . . of course, we drop everything and we go to Toronto. Like, uh, it’s just not even a question, like, *I’ll* be there’ (emphasis added). Her move from the plural ‘we’ to the singular ‘I’ is significant: less narcissistic slippage, more verbal manoeuvring in *re/*branding. She is rescuing a disabled child with an almost missionary zeal that her mother reiterates: ‘That’s the mission’.

Theologian Russell S. Woodbridge, writing about prosperity Christianity, notes ironically that ‘[a]lthough Jesus used his own two feet to spread the gospel, one prosperity teacher needs a \$65 million plane to spread the good news’ ([2017](#), 151). Woodbridge uncannily prefigures the scene described above, in which mega-wealthy individuals ‘do good’ through ostentatious acts that in turn are figured as proof of their devoted Christianity. Kim, cast as angel, offers a free ride on her metaphoric wings to a known sinner, demonstrating good Christian citizenship. Kris’ line ‘Thank God for that plane’ shows appreciation for the material wealth that is intrinsic to ‘the mission’. Kim’s wealth does not feature as a lucky coincidence in relation to her actions but as intertwined with her grace.

Genesis: patriarchy and the Momager

Popular culture, as a ‘landscape of the present’ (McRobbie [1994](#), 14), tends to ignore or gloss over ancestry stories. While the Kardashians are always of-the-moment, with social

media full of their various performances *right now*, they also narrativise memory and nostalgia, especially ‘memory making’. Ruby Smith analyses temporality’s centrality in their success:

They are experts in memory creating (through the show and their social media posts), conserving (through products and personal archives), curating (deciding when and where to share with us) and collapsing (through manipulating timelines, imagery, and storytelling) memory. (forthcoming)

In this section, I outline two strands of the Kardashian origin story – rhetoric around their patriarchal Armenian roots, and the matriarchal story told in Kris’ memoir (Jenner 2012). I consider how each feeds into a citizenship based on prosperity Christianity that is also intertwined with manufactured, purchased beauty.

Kardashian Armenian ancestry (Halperin 2016, 3–5; Kardashian 2015a) symbolically grounds them, intertwining Christianity and wealth-building. Kourtney, in a post for her lifestyle brand Poosh, writes about going to Armenia:

A big part of this trip was visiting the Etchmiadzin Cathedral, and getting our kids baptized there. It’s not only the first-ever church in Armenia, but is thought to be the first-ever cathedral in the world because Armenia was the first nation to adopt Christianity. It was such a powerful feeling being there. (Kardashian 2016)

Like many invocations of their Christian and Armenian roots, the deeply personal is deployed to promote the commercial. Thus, ‘first’ appears three times, emphasising best and desirable. A common version of the Kardashians’ origin narrative (Halperin 2016, 3–5) tells of Kim’s great-grandfather Tatos (1896–1964) emigrating because of being part of a persecuted protestant community that refused to follow some Eastern Orthodox traditions, and becoming a multimillionaire via a garbage collection business. This heritage is invoked repeatedly and multi-modally (such as in social media posts, interviews, etc., e.g. Kardashian 2015a, 2015b, 2022), combining religiosity and entrepreneurship in a classic American Dream story (see Ayuningtyas and Achmad 2021; Lezra 2024). In her memoir, Kris recalls that in New York in her early twenties she prayed to be transferred to Los Angeles to spend more time with Robert Kardashian:

... a born-again Christian. He prayed before every meal and before each and every business meeting. He even carried a Bible with him. I had grown up going to a Presbyterian church on Sundays and holidays, but I was never really devout, especially not as devout as Robert. (Jenner 2012, 40)

His spirituality was endearing, as she tells it – although she does not explain why – perhaps she assumes her readers will automatically view Christianity as admirable: ‘[I]t was impressive to me that Robert seemed to be such a religious man. *Wow*, I thought, *what an amazing guy*’ (2012, 40, her italics). Thus, the very inception of the Kardashian dynasty – the parents coming together – is linked to Christianity. Almost immediately, this Christianity is aligned with prosperity as Kris notes that Robert did not carry any ordinary Bible. His was expensive, ‘in a special leather cover, hand tooled with his initials engraved on the front’ (2012, 41). Contrary to Christian ethics that might at least pretend that austerity is preferred to displays of wealth, there is no embarrassment about love of extravagance in Kris’ memoir, or indeed anywhere in the entire Kardashian oeuvre. In fact, luxury cars, private jets, and the grandest of homes feature in most Kardashian

narratives. However, wealth is carefully framed: crucially, it is presented as both hard-won *and* God-given. Prosperity Christianity's ideology allows a seemingly paradoxical combination of great wealth and religiosity, but – in line with its links to capitalism as I show below, only in the context of labour. For example, on finding her dream house (it featured in KUWTK but has since been replaced with many much grander mansions), Kris writes:

I knew it was God who had taken me on a path and I had to put one step in front of the other —to live in house after house after house—for a very important reason. This house was more than a house. This house was a stage, this was the house that everybody would fall in love with. This was a house dying for an audience. I never could have dreamed of how large that audience would become. (Jenner 2012, 255)

The iconography here is striking: Kris, who labels herself 'MOM, MANAGER, MOMAGER, LOVER OF LIFE, LOVER OF CHRIST' (capitals in original) on X (Twitter) (Jenner and (@krisjenner) 2024), attributes her 'path' to the will of a divine being: 'I knew it was God'. She was dutifully observant, working to put 'one step in front of the other' and thus found a path to fame.⁴ The rhetoric aligns wealth accumulation with something ordained.

Kris' memoir makes strategic use of a rhetoric of 'prayers answered' and an 'epiphany' in order to position her, and the Kardashians more generally, as actively religious in everyday life. Her 'answered prayers' allowed her to move to Los Angeles, where she joined Robert in his born-again Christianity, attending services largely run by the deeply right-wing Pat Boone (Wisneski 2022, 27–30). Associations between religion and prosperity abound: 'The minute I walked into Pat Boone's big, beautiful, sprawling house in Beverly Hills, I met the most welcoming, wonderful, magical group of people' (Jenner 2012, 42). These included Zsa Zsa Gabor, Doris Day, Priscilla Presley, and Glenn Ford, bringing notions of Hollywood-style beauty firmly into the mix. Kris then links notions of physical beauty, in particular deployment of cosmetic surgery, to Christian practice:

It was 1988 . . . and a few of my Bible study girlfriends were having their boobs done. Pretty soon, *everybody* was having boob jobs. Of course, I decided I need a boob job too. I had four kids and the boobs were looking like they could use some perking up. So I scheduled the surgery. (Jenner 2012, 66–67)

Jenkins and Marti (2012) argue that the interplay between Christianity and a *worked-for* beauty is well established in U.S. culture, noting a 'prosperity-tinged discourse of independent, strong, attractive, and youthful Christian women' (Jenkins and Marti 2012, 242). Kris' epilogue, titled 'The Epiphany', deploys Christian rhetoric alongside cosmetic surgery with the seemingly unironic statement: 'I never imagined that a neck-lift would be a transcendental, life-changing experience for me at the age of fifty-five' (2012, 293). She credits the neck-lift experience with having taught her about 'love, friendship, loyalty, self-control, and the power of letting go' (2012, 293). This echoes some dominant and hegemonic cosmetic surgery narratives. Many people describe their cosmetic surgeries as transformative beyond the physical. Some describe going into the darkness of general anaesthetic and waking into the light transformed – dare I say 'born again' – as akin to revelation (see Jones 2011). Sara Ackerman writes that 'medical travelers in Costa Rica often describe cosmetic surgery as a project of "mental

health”, “transition”, or “rebirth” rather than as a quest for beauty’ (2010, 409). Thus, cosmetic surgery can be a way to reclaim wholeness, to practice self-love. ‘Doing it for me’ is another trope in cosmetic surgery narratives (Bordo 2009) and Kris describes it similarly: ‘I was working hard all the time, not taking any time for myself, and I felt like doing something like this – just for me – might just give me a boost of confidence and make me feel better’ (Jenner 2012, 294). The patriarchal and matriarchal origin stories outlined above anchor the Kardashian form of citizenship. They show that their connection to God enables their hardworking entrepreneurialism, which in turn leads to purchase of luxuries, including beauty.

Conceptualizing citizenship

This section conceptually frames citizenship through lenses of U.S. prosperity Christianity; pedagogy; ‘neutral’/‘surplus’, and finally aesthetic/cosmetic. I show that citizenship resides in the body, most easily in those bodies that are deemed ‘neutral’. I argue that the Kardashians enact and embody a kind of citizenship that is a) fuelled by prosperity Christianity, b) pedagogical, and c) both ‘neutral’ and ‘surplus’ via (some of) their cosmetic surgical embodiments. By analysing the Kardashians’ ‘acts of citizenship’ (Isin and Nielsen 2008), I am not referring to legal status but, in line with Claudia Liebelt, claim that citizenship is ‘constituted by gendered and racialized materializations of belonging rather than formal status alone’ (2019, 687).

U.S. Prosperity Christian Citizenship

U.S. Christianity and citizenship have an established shared history. Penny Edgell et al. have argued that ‘America’s history, culture, and identity are inherently grounded in the Christian faith ... Christianity is essential to the existence of the United States’ (2016, 608). Further, Mary V. Wrenn posits that prosperity Christianity in particular is intricately linked with the development of late capitalism, an intersection she calls ‘a distinctly American invention’ (2020, 5). This is logical, for more traditional versions of Christianity are usually associated with the antithesis of wealth-building. The prosperity Christianity/capitalist nexus is central to Kardashian endeavours which are built around the notion that ‘God ordains prosperity according to belief ... [and] conspicuous displays of wealth honor God and His beneficence’ (Wrenn 2020, 9–10; also Cornelio and Medina 2000). This is apparent in the vignette above: ‘Kim Air’ is used to ‘do good’ while ownership of a private jet is presented as merited because Kim is ‘a little angel’. Ruth Bloch notes that in revolutionary America the ‘Catholic ideals of celibacy and charity’ were replaced with ‘individual virtues – piety, temperance, frugality, and work’ (1987, 37). Nobody could accuse the Kardashians of frugality or temperance, but they are careful to perform work and piety for the cameras. Kim’s ongoing prison reform work, like the plane scene above, indirectly positions her as ‘saintly’. One prisoner she helped to release wrote ‘GOD IS GOOD!. WHAT THE DEVIL MEANT FOR BAD, GOD REVERSED AGAIN, FOR MY GOOD. THANK YOU KIM KARDISHIAN-WEST’ (misspelling in original)

(Saunders 2019; see also Espada 2023). Thus, through various multi-modal Kardashian content, Christian acts of ‘goodness’ appear seemingly unproblematically *alongside* exhibitions of extreme wealth.

Pedagogic citizenship

For Nikolas Rose (1999), the development of citizenship no longer happens in answer to learning and teaching around ‘higher powers’ such as religion or moral politics. Instead, twenty-first century citizenship is communicated in the mediascape, and ethical selves are created via active self-fabrications that happen in response to media products. Rose contends that morals and acceptable modes of citizenry are taught through ‘little pedagogies’, which are the unassuming, entertaining kinds of casual teachings about culture that play out in multi-modal forms including soap operas and reality television (1999, 188–189). There is a parallel between little pedagogies and prosperity Christianity because both conflate ethical identity formation with consumption practices. The Kardashians’ rise paralleled that of social media, of which they – but especially Kim – were early and very successful adopters (Hall 2014). Through social media and reality television, they further industrialised Rose’s ‘little pedagogies’ – particularly in relation to beauty and feminine self-presentation – by embodying and selling what Mimi Thi Nguyen calls ‘regimes of expertise’ (2011, 364). Through little pedagogies, they proselytise to audience-consumers about makeup, workouts, fashion, shapewear, diets, etc. Some of these are overt, e.g. selling specific products such as waist trainers (Kinney 2017) and ‘health’ remedies (Hussain 2022), while others are covert, e.g. audiences seeing forms of beauty that they find desirable, and emulation happening through consumption. Bodies may be ‘devalued’ because of race, gender, or sexuality, as I show below, but little pedagogies teach that they can be actively worked upon – through purchase of correct products – to enhance citizenship.

Cosmetic and aesthetic citizenship

Research linking citizenship to beauty technologies and practices shows how undesirable excess can be cut down to size – sometimes literally through cosmetic surgery – to elevate citizenship and gain symbolic recognition of selfhood.⁵ Carmen Alvaro Jarrín, focusing on Brazil, notes that ‘people believe that cosmetic technologies could potentially provide upward mobility and its effects are even tied to notions of citizenship’ (2022, 569; also; Jarrín 2017). In analysing beauty labour practices in Turkey, Liebelt coins ‘aesthetic citizenship’ and frames ‘the affective desire to become beautiful . . . as an act of citizenship during a particular moment in time’ (Liebelt 2019, 699). Nguyen, in an article about an American-run beauty school in Kabul, suggests we should ‘extend our imagination to think about the distribution of beauty . . . within and between an empire’s subjects and citizens as a part of imperial state-craft’ (Nguyen 2011, 361). Jarrín, Liebelt and Nguyen all show how discourses of beauty are linked to citizenship, and how this is always geographically and temporally contingent.

Neutral and surplus citizenship

The ideal, contemporary U.S. body, fitting the standards for unquestioned citizenship, is coded as neutral. Lauren Berlant writes that '[t]he national body is ambiguous because its norms of privilege require a universalising logic of disembodiment' (1993, 564). It can exist outside of commentary because it is 'disembodied', it is privileged because of being 'ordinary'. David Russell puts it another way: the 'ability to make the body abstract, invisible, and non-identifiable has been the most desirable quality for a citizen to possess' (Russell 2004, n.p.). Thus, white, able-bodied, cis-male, middle-class and educated bodies make subjects who are *neutral*, enjoying citizenship by default.

Which bodies then, do not have privileges of unquestioned, neutral citizenship? Berlant clarifies: 'In twentieth-century America, anyone coded as "low", embodied, or subculturally "specific" continues to experience, with banal regularity, the corporeal sensation of nationality as a sensation over which she/he has no control' (1993, 564). Thus, some subjects may have the (legal) fact of, but not the peaceful enjoyment of, citizenship. Further, for Russell, 'low' citizenship is a matter of 'surplus embodiment', a case of too much visibility: an excess of corporeality (Russell 2004, n.p.). Feminine, queer, disabled, poor, Black, brown, or foreign bodies become highly visible, and hence have symbolically lower citizenship status, because of 'excess' embodiment.

In the next section, I explore ways in which the Kardashians embody the kinds of citizenship outlined above in relation to a particular type of cosmetic procedure, namely the so-called Brazilian butt lift (BBL). I argue that the BBL's complexity in relation to the Kardashians' acts of citizenship is tied to cultural appropriation, particularly 'blackfishing'⁶, a form of cultural appropriation wherein blackness is commodified and desirable but only on the bodies of white women (Stevens 2021, 1): it 'reinforces the idea that blackness is something that can be put on for fun and then taken off' (Hussain 2022, 122). Blackfishing is always highly problematic and is particularly so in the case of the Kardashians: 'excess' embodiment usually leads to questionable citizenship, but they are able to embrace and purchase 'surplus' as fashion because of their wealth and white privilege.

Playing with surplus embodiment: the case of the "Brazilian butt lift"

The BBL is a cosmetic surgical procedure, part of a suite known as gluteoplasties, that enlarges the buttocks. Its problematic racialized label is common in cosmetic surgery discourse (surgical, academic and popular, e.g. Cansancao et al. 2019; Oranges et al. 2020; Appleford 2016; O'Connor 2023). 'Brazilian' refers to stereotyped Brazilian bodies and to the procedure's invention being credited to Brazilian surgeon Ivo Pitanguy (Silva 2022, n. p.). The fastest growing operation since the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ISAPS) began its global survey in 2010, it usually consists of liposuction followed by lipo-injection. Fat is vacuumed from somewhere the patient does not want it, then 'purified', separating it from blood and tissue before being cannulated back into the buttocks⁷ (Cansancao et al. 2019; Oranges et al. 2020).

Crucial to my argument below that the Kardashians adopted a mode of surplus citizenship *temporarily*, is the fact that the BBL can be *reversed* with further liposuction (Safeek, Dang, and Mast 2023). In the KUWTK pilot (Ray 2007) Kim was famously body-

shamed by Kris, who said as her daughter reached into the refrigerator ‘I think she has a little junk in the trunk!’ This produced a pleased-looking smile from Kim rather than a show of shame about her prominent butt and represented an important change in notions of mainstream Western women’s beauty. Kim’s pride was one of the reasons for her initial popularity with women of normative body shapes (i.e. not uniformly thin, tall, blonde, and fair-skinned). She was ‘lauded by her fans for promoting an alternative to the ideal of extreme thinness’ (Sastre 2014, 124). Feminists made tentative positive claims around what looked like the development of a more inclusive and achievable beauty ideal (Appelford 2016; Jones 2016; Wissinger 2016), while popular media also celebrated the big butt. For example, one online article aptly titled ‘16 fashion decisions that make your butt look bigger and more beautiful’ offered tips including ‘[c]arry a small purse. A small purse makes your butt look bigger’ (Sepyahina 2018). This seemed a seismic shift. The large butt was being embraced and was quickly brought into the capitalist mainstream by way of the purchasable BBL. Visual comparisons of photos of Kardashian butts over time, especially Kim’s, speculating on BBL and/or its removal, are part of popular Kardashian discourse (e.g. Pemberton 2017; Kindlick 2021; Saint-monkey 2023). Consensus seems to be that Kim’s butt grew between 2010 and 2020, then shrank again.

In this time period, BBL numbers increased dramatically worldwide from 59,372 procedures in 2010 to 820,762 procedures in 2022 (ISAPS, 2011–2011–2023).⁸ The Kardashians have not directly marketed the BBL. Nor have they admitted to the procedure but speculation, especially amongst plastic surgeons, is rife (e.g. Youn 2022; Stern 2022). They attribute their butts not to surgery but to working out, offering little pedagogies such as ‘My 7 Steps to a Toned Butt’ (Kardashian and (@KimKardashian) 2018). Discursively then, the BBL is aligned with working out, even as audiences ‘know’ that these butts are surgical. Additionally, hard work(outs) align with a prosperity Christian ethic that allows the Kardashians to frame their purchased bodies in terms of effort and goodness. Khloe, the most performatively religious member of the family, tweets ‘I love praying! I always start off my day with a prayer/conversation with God’ (Kardashian and (@khloekardashian) 2016), but also says that working out is: ‘really religious for me, I do it super early in the morning before my daughter wakes up’ (quoted in Barrymore 2021, n.p.). In multi-modal popular culture discourse then, through the figure of Khloe, prayer and workouts align. Because the BBL is obfuscated by rhetoric around working out, it is in turn aligned with Christianity. Mixed messages such as these conflate across Kardashian multi-media, and audiences ‘learn’ through a slightly twisted logic that the ability to purchase a butt is merited through faith. The BBL became ‘common’ in both qualitative and classed senses after 2015, as noted by the news portal Vox: ‘You spend enough time on TikTok and Instagram, and it can start to feel like you’re the only person in the world who hasn’t had their butt done’ (Jennings 2021, n.p.). Recent statistics show further rises, but social observers have noticed the BBL’s diminishing visibility in popular culture and, notably, on the bodies of the Kardashians because ‘as with any trend, once the BBL became popular in the beauty mainstream, it began to lose its social and financial capital’ (Atlanta 2022, n.p.).

As I noted above, one of the important things about the BBL is that it is reversible. Currently, those who are ‘fashion forward’ and have the financial capacity to do so, are reducing themselves, removing their BBLs or replacing them with the tellingly named ‘skinny’ or ‘country club’ BBL (connoting the elite), which is slightly smaller and typically

linked to thin bodies (Hill 2023).⁹ The rise and fall of the BBL signals a brief period when a specific form of surplus citizenship as propagated by the Kardashians was fashionable. Historically, cosmetic surgery has been used as a way to ‘blend in’ and to metaphorically *reduce* one’s corporeality. According to cosmetic surgery studies – with the exception of breast augmentation, deployed to delineate bodies into binary genders (Heyes and Jones 2009) – its *raison d’être* has been to work *against* surplus citizenship (Davis 2013; Gilman 1998; Jones 2008). The fashion for large butts and the BBL seems to do the opposite. For people who ingested dominant Euro-American beauty discourse in the late twentieth century, the BBL can be baffling. Fuelled by class-based aesthetics, women’s bodies were understood as beautiful only when white, slim, and almost butt-less.¹⁰ The cult of thinness, most prevalent in the ‘heroin chic’ aesthetic of the 1990s, was closely associated with whiteness. In this paradigm, large butts indicated surplus citizenship in the sense that Russell outlines above – something unwanted, perhaps superfluous. As cultural studies scholar Myra Mendible noted, deliberately invoking racist language, ‘[A] big butt is associated with “unnatural” sex, excrement or the excess and physicality identified with “darker” races’. (2009, 1). It was invoked to stigmatise and fetishise Black women and their bodies (Barrera 2002; Brown 2005; Netto 2005; Sastre 2014), with the prominent example of the abduction and spectacularizing of Khoikhoi woman Sara Baartman by European colonizers under the name ‘Hottentot Venus’ (Gilman 1985). Within the U.S. American context, it references African-American bodies (Hobson 2018) and histories of slavery. More recently, it has come to stand for eroticised ‘Brazilian’ bodies, with stereotyped Mestizaje features, that are, according to anthropologist Gilberto Freyre, racialised ‘dark skin ... slim waistline, large buttocks, and small breasts’ (quoted in Goldenberg 2010, 222). Given this context, one may ask why larger butts are sought, *inviting* surplus citizenship, and why the Kardashians appear to have opted for BBLs on already curvaceous bodies.

The answer, I argue, is tied to profit, but also the unique role of the Kardashian bodies as media and mirrors of U.S. cultural trends. It is no coincidence that the rise and fall of the BBL somewhat paralleled Obama’s presidency (2009–2017), during which time some Black cultural features were ‘on trend’ in line with his ‘cosmopolitan blackness’ (Selzer 2010, 15). The Kardashians capitalised on this trend by straddling established (white) forms of beauty and adopting select Black ones. Ren Ellis Neyra writes that ‘... Kim’s white ass secures Kim’s non-Blackness, which, through time, has secured her and her sisters’ highly financialized capacity to play with nonwhite racialization’s fleshy shapes and profitability ...’ (2020, n.p.; also Hussain 2022, 115–116). Cady Lang notes that ‘there is no separation to be made between [Kardashian] success and their exploitation of Black aesthetics (2021, n.p.). Black women’s bodies haunt Kardashian-led fashions; as cultural appropriation and blackfishing, the BBL sits alongside their lip augmentations (O’Connor 2023) and many of their grooming and fashion choices (Jackson 2019, 31–46).

Writing about a small section of the Brazilian upper-middle classes, Mirian Goldenberg notes that their ‘economic, political, cultural and symbolic power [allows them to] create and reproduce bodies that are socially legitimized ... [They can shape] their bodies in order to be attractive, envied and imitated’ (2010, 220–221). However, she could have been describing the more general, U.S.-centric interplay between manufactured/purchased beauty and citizenship that the Kardashians

embody. Like these upper middle-class Brazilians, the Kardashians operate in a paradigm wherein those with power and full access to citizenship rights have desirable bodies and the means to make them *more* desirable. It follows that those with less power despite officially holding legal citizenship status may follow suit in order to improve their lives – the BBL is a case in point. The revision to an elite aesthetic compliant with smaller butts began with a move ‘back to white’: meaning a set of fashionable ‘looks’ that favour small, blonde, pale-skinned bodies. This move is broadly aligned to a post-Obama politico-cultural landscape, indicated by ironic headlines such as ‘To Keep Your BBL Or Not? That Is The Question: The Kardashian’s Return To Their White Bodies’ (Samuel 2022, n.p.).

Similarly, Kathryn Lofton writes about how Kim Kardashian’s whiteness gives her a ‘racial mobility that black celebrities, no matter how light-skinned, are rarely allowed’ (2017, 183). What some celebrated as a reframing of surplus embodiment was a playing out of this racial mobility. Hence, one could argue that the Kardashians used their cultural and financial capital to play at (Black) surplus citizenship in a moment when Blackness was fashionable – thus increasing their wealth and fame – before discarding it bodily, literally fading back to white, and reverting to a comfortable neutral citizenship.

Conclusion

This article has made a conceptual argument around the roles of aesthetic body modifications, prosperity Christianity, and beauty in constructions and performances of U.S. citizenship. It has shown how the perfectible body’s link with Christianity becomes overt in the case of the Kardashians as a cultural phenomenon, and has considered this becoming alongside modes of citizenship and in bodily terms by an analysis of the so-called Brazilian butt lift. The Kardashians’ amalgamation of core entrepreneurialism, prosperity Christianity, and purchased beauty, I argued, showcases a complex version of U.S. citizenship. This citizenship may flirt with difference, for example by playing with surplus embodiment, but it remains deeply rooted in conservative values and racialised practices and processes.

Notes

1. Kris, Kendall and Kylie are Jenners, Kim was Kardashian-West but is now Kardashian again, and Kourtney is Kardashian-Barker. Here I refer to them collectively as Kardashians. When writing about them individually I will use first names only, to avoid confusion.
2. Blake Karsten Beaver calls this televisual narrative device ‘meta-textual confessional’ (2024, 6). It comprises one character, filmed alone, directly addressing the camera, elaborating their feelings about the narrative.
3. Khloe has acknowledged a rhinoplasty (Biggs 2022).
4. In 2009 Kris co-founded the California Community Church with a pastor named Brad Johnson. There is little published about it barring speculation about tax status (Cohen and (@Samanthacohentalks) 2022; Moreton 2023). There is no mention of Kardashians on the Church’s website, <https://www.calchurch.com/>.
5. Conversely, ‘too much’ cosmetic surgery leads to surplus embodiment and otherness, e.g. Jocelyn Wildenstein and Michael Jackson (Jones 2008, 123–125 and 160–169).
6. ‘Blackfishing’ was popularised by journalist Wanna Thompson on X(Twitter) in 2018.

7. The cannulas can be the length of an arm, and thick as a straw; they are moved back and forth under the skin rigorously. I've witnessed a liposuction operation: the surgeon was sweating with effort. I was surprised by the smell, which was like a fatty roast dinner.
8. These are only those procedures reported to ISAPS. Actual global numbers are likely far greater.
9. One cosmetic surgeon's website advises that 'A "Skinny BBL" or "Skinny Brazilian Butt Lift" is a body contouring procedure designed for very thin or petite patients who typically have very little fat' (Chicago Breast & Body Aesthetics, no date).
10. See Jones [forthcoming b](#) for a discussion of the classed aspects of Kim Kardashian's figure in relation to 'low' and 'high' fashion.

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