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Issue XXIII

Race and Markets



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Issue XXIII

Race and Markets

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EDITING AS ANTI-RACISM

Dr. Bel Parnell-Berry and
Dr. Noémi Michel

Our organisation, the European Race and Imagery Foundation (ERIF), has been committed since its inception in 2013 to educate and organise campaigns against racist imagery in Europe, with a strong focus on anti-Black racist artefacts—such as the blackface character of *Zwarte Piet* in the Netherlands. We operate as part of a long-standing tradition of struggle, inspired by multiple, small Black and POC-led organisations, in Europe and elsewhere, that came before us. Throughout our years of activism, we have learnt that Black-led anti-racist discourses and initiatives are marked by endurance. We have also learnt that this longevity often gets lost in our public cultures and dominant collective memories.

Last spring we witnessed the re-intensifying of the global Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in response to the murders of Black people at the hands of US police. On this side of the Atlantic, we were inspired, energised and galvanised. However, we also witnessed a significant gap between our understanding of anti-racism’s history in terms of its longevity and multiplicity, and the white dominant public’s apprehension of anti-racism, considered as an often homogenised “new discovery”. Trendy magazines multiplied portraits of anti-racist leaders and devoted short articles to the struggle against anti-Black

racism, without putting those into the context of the decades-long and multifaceted struggle within Europe.

Consequently, Spring and Summer 2020 were exhausting and draining for many campaigners who had already been actively engaged with anti-racism work for many years, as we found ourselves suddenly over-exposed and pulled in numerous directions by the rest of the world, at once interested in our ongoing efforts. Moreover, as the BLM protests spread and evolved from the US to Europe, our communities—from Bristol, to the Hague, to Geneva and beyond—were forced to grapple more than ever before with localised, institutional racial discrimination.

It was under such intense circumstances that we published our open-access special issue for *darkmatter* journal in November 2020.¹ This special issue is based on content from ERIF's first conference, *Returning the Gaze: Blackface in Europe*, which took place six years prior in Amsterdam, bringing together various artists, scholars and activists to discuss the practice of and resistance to blackface and other racist modes of representation, specifically within the European context. The special issue gave an opportunity to bring the dialogues and strategies exchanged at the conference full circle, at a poignant and needed time of healing and reckoning within anti-racism circles. We also worked towards the amplification and the accessibility of its content via our social media project *Quotes of Resistance*, by displaying excerpts of each article on digital and printed cards.²

Below, we display two of these cards as well as an excerpt of the editorial we wrote for the special issue. By offering these snapshots, we want to reflect on two ways our special issue exemplifies our commitment to channel anti-racist expressions that refuse the marketisation, compartmentalisation and trendisation of the "race issue." The first way is to do with *the emphasis on history and context*.

1. Bel Parnell-Berry and Noémi Michel (eds.), *(De-)Facing the dark face of Europe; the on-going struggle against blackface and anti-Black racist imagery*, *Darkmatter*, issue 15 (2020), available at: <https://darkmatter-hub.pubpub.org/issue-15>.

2. See <https://quotesofresistance.wordpress.com/> and <https://www.instagram.com/raceandimagery/> for more content and context about this social media campaign.

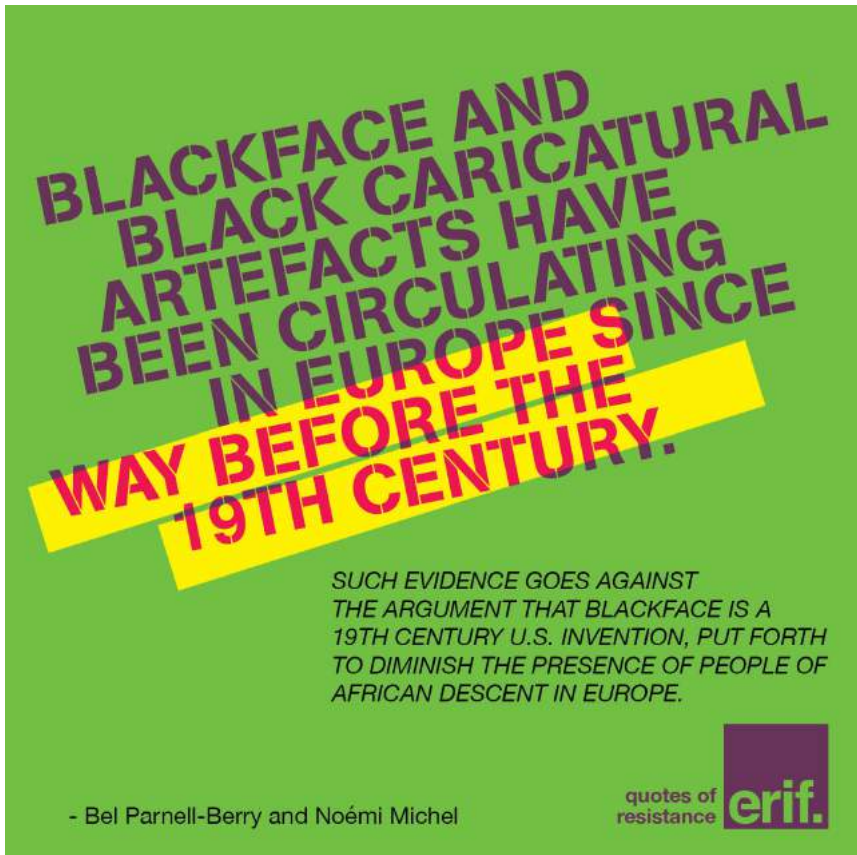


Figure 1: Digital postcard staging an excerpt of Bel Parnell-Berry's and Noémi Michel's editorial as a Quote of Resistance. Design by Burobraak @ERIF

As exemplified by this card, ERIF's special issue provides a historical as well as contemporary context for systemic racism in numerous cultural and national conditions. Each article of our special issue inscribes the struggle against blackface and other racist artefacts within a specific context and history. For instance, Vanessa Eileen Thompson situates her study of a recent Black-led campaign against a racist image in a Parisian storefront within the long history of spatial containment in the French Republic, whereas Patricia Shor links Dutch mobilisation against *Zwarte Piet* to a colonial archive of the Dutch desire to contain

Black voices. By being oriented towards detailed historicisation and contextualisation, the special issue offers much needed information to apprehend the 2020 BLM moment as part of a long and complex translocal history of resistance.

A second way our special issue disrupts the danger of racism being reduced to an ineffective trendy discourse, is to do with highlighting the importance of experiential knowledge.

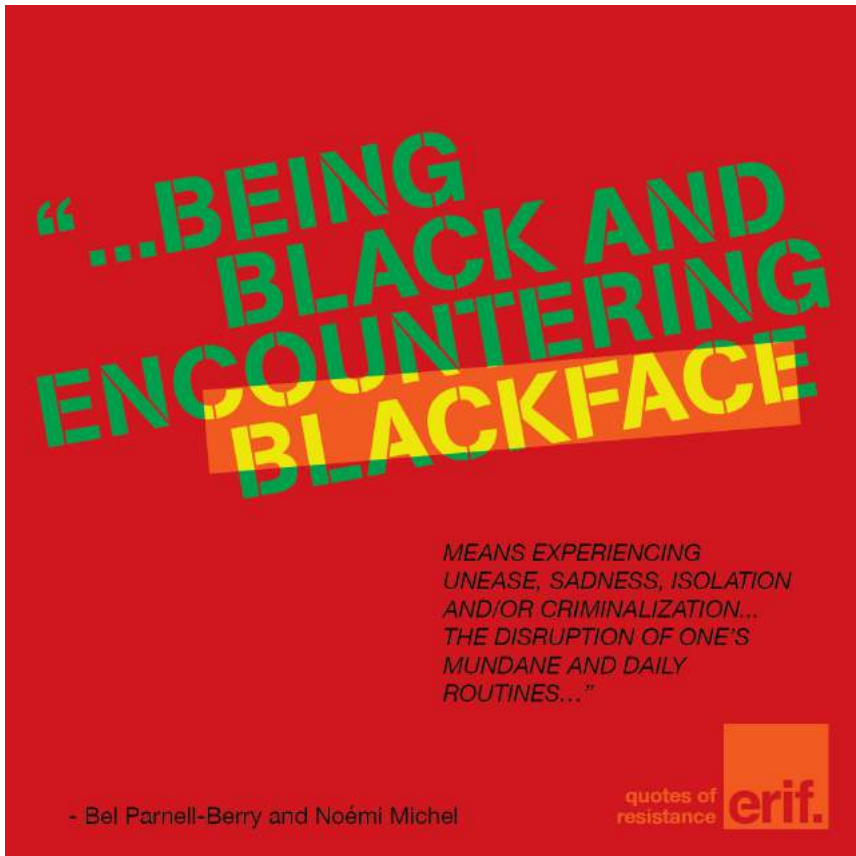


Figure 2: Digital postcard staging an excerpt of Bel Parnell-Berry's and Noémi Michel's editorial as a Quote of Resistance. Design by Burobraak @ERIF

Many pieces of our special issue are written by Black artists, academics and activists, bringing to the fore the costs and specificities of engaging against racist imagery while—at the same time—being targeted by this very imagery. For instance, the filmmaker and thinker Karina Griffith recalls what it means for her camera to film occurrences of blackface during the festival of Cologne. Anchored in the Black feminist tradition of *accounting for, connecting and transmitting*, we ourselves open the special issue by vulnerably and reflexively sharing an autobiographical account each, to demonstrate the tangible link between our analysis as scholars and lives as Black women. Let us here recall those accounts.

Bel:

It was November—always a difficult time to be Black in the Netherlands—and I was going to the local post office to mail a package back to the UK, where I am from. The post office is about a five-minute walk from my house, which is very convenient considering all of the international mail we handle as a family. On that day, I walked into the shop and found myself surrounded by *Zwarte Piet* dolls and decorations. I know this image well—growing up the similar *gollywog* was familiar to me and gave the same unsettled feeling at each encounter. There is no way to grow out of, or get used to, this feeling when faced with an image meant to dehumanise oneself.

My face flushed and my hands trembled. My voice quivered slightly as I made the necessary arrangements for the package. On any other day, I would have contained my discomfort and left, or perhaps taken a discreet photo of the offensive display for ERIF's *Sinterklaas Brand and Product* study.³ However, for some reason, this time, I could not remain polite, docile, happy. If I was uncomfortable then the shop assistant was going to feel that way too. The fear of a potentially violent reaction in response to me

3. Find out more about the latest report from this study here: <https://erifonline.org/2020/06/05/identity-crisis-as-part-of-a-new-beginning/>.

calling out the injustice of this imagery and its message melted away, and I suddenly found myself sternly engaging the shop assistant in why she believed such products were still appropriate, even after so much discussion in the Netherlands regarding their racist heritage.

The confrontation ended with the assistant chasing me out of the shop, yelling that it was discrimination against her for me to call the decorations racist—such a typical and unoriginal response when being reminded of one’s own privilege. Despite me maintaining my composure and not raising my voice at all, she was shaking and red just from the mere suggestion that she might be doing something wrong. She was joined by a colleague and began explaining frantically what *I* had done to *her*. I shouted at them: “You know this is racism!”, before hurrying away, allowing their panicked discussion to fade into the noise of the traffic around me. However uncomfortable and momentarily out of place the assistant might have felt in that moment, it cannot compare to a lifetime of being assumed to be out of place. It cannot compare to the subtle as well as explicit manifestations of afrophobia I’ve had to tolerate in numerous scenarios throughout my life—often politely, calmly, cherrily. But not on that day. Not today. Never again.

Noémi:

It was the end of the year, and I was hanging out at the famous “*course de l’escalade*”—one of the most popular races that take place in Geneva, in Switzerland. At this day-long event, the last race is the funniest. Everyone can take part regardless of age, gender and running ability, and most of the people wear costumes. The usually ascetic, old city of Geneva becomes invaded by a big fancy dress party. Thousands of children, teenagers and adults demonstrate their creative skills and imagination in the art of dressing up. One can see running Christmas trees, comic book characters, giant boats made up of six people... One will also encounter white people dressed up as “Africans,” “Indians,”

"primitives"... At that very moment, one sees one's simple joy to be part of a collective festivity killed. The sudden encounter with blackface reminds one that joy and lightness are always provisory when one does not belong to the white majority.

Once, I was fed up with such killjoy encounters, and I decided that I would talk to the couple in blackface, dressed up as "savage Africans," who were resting after the race not far away from me. But, the white people I attended the race with prevented me from doing so: "It is a festivity, it's for laughing, please let it go!" To this day, I regret that I listened to them and prioritised their comfort over my own unease. If I could go back to that moment, I would say to them and to the couple in blackface: "If expressing my sadness kills your joy, that means that your joy is built upon the suppression of mine. Do you really need to disregard or consume my dehumanisation to have a good time?"

Revisiting those experiences provided us with an analytical vocabulary, anchored in our lives, in order to write the editorial and frame the special issue. It furthermore gave us the opportunity to repair, through writing, the violent effects on our bodies and souls of the moments recalled. Accounting for, transmitting and connecting our stories was a way to heal, while at the same time, by relieving those past wounds we could propose strategies for talking back, refusing and resisting in everyday situations. Lived experience can risk being extracted for sensationalist and uncaring mediatic treatments, oriented towards the rapid consumption of a white audience. In contrast, our special issue is concerned with providing spaces for the experiential to become both a source of knowledge and of (past and future) repair.

By presenting excerpts of our special issue and social media campaign *Quotes of Resistance*, we hope to have highlighted some strategies and modes of writing and editing that go against the impoverishment of anti-racism within the current wave of attention towards the "race issue" from mainstream media and institutions. Historicising and

contextualising on the one hand, and accounting for, connecting and transmitting experiences on the other constitute anti-racist gestures that require a lot of (very often unpaid) labour. Such labour, in our case, was pursued with hope and passion, as we know that our traditions of resistance will continue to thrive within our own, alternative and subaltern economy of attention.