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Editorial: (De-)Facing the Dark face of Europe; the ongoing struggle against blackface and anti-Black racist imagery

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It is June and we are trying to wrap up this editorial. Protests for Black lives have been raging in the US and in certain cities across Europe. We are two Black women, with Black close ones spread across the globe. We feel that our lives are precarious, we feel overwhelmed. Yet, we also feel that this special issue which focuses on resistance to blackface, and other anti-Black racist imageries and artefacts in contemporary Europe, is more needed now than ever. Dominant racist representations of Black people have harmful material effects that constrain horizons and narrow life expectations. Framed as criminal, sexually disposable, mocked as servants, savages, inferiors, fetishized as entertainment - as Black people we are intensely exposed to and associated with unbearable representations of our bodies, lives and emotions. Consequently, we elaborate strategies of resistance to gain authorship of our place in the world. Our special issue wants to honour this intellectual and political labour. In contrast to the velocious social media feed and mainstream news coverage, we feel evermore that we need to make space and devote time for cultivating anti-racist and Black liberatory work.

Blackface in contemporary Europe remains less covered than in the US by contemporary critical race scholarship. Non-exhaustively, some contemporary examples of blackface practices and artefacts throughout Europe include Morris dancers in the UK, for instance in Broadstairs, Kent and at Wickham festival in Hampshire. $\frac{1}{2}$ Also from the UK, the television shows Little Britain (BBC), Bo Selecta (Channel 4) and Lunatics (Netflix), $\frac{2}{3}$ and perhaps the most notorious and far-reaching British example: the gollywog. On the continent, in recent years we have seen thousands of teenagers wear blackface to portray the "Three Kings" as part of a national festival on the 6th January in Spain. This also occurs in Germany, where children dress up for Three Kings' Day in groups of three, typically with one wearing blackface. 4 White German and Swiss adults and children also take great pleasure in blackface, performing a wide array of racist stereotypes of Black people at the annual festivals, as this special issue explores. The latter also refers, on numerous occasions, to the Zwarte Piet character from the Netherlands and Belgium, which has been fiercely debated and resisted for the past century. 5 In France, controversies have risen over racist colonial artefacts in the public spaces or over celebrities posting themselves on social media in blackface as exemplified by football player Antoine Griezmann, who wanted to pay homage to the Harlem Globetrotters. 6 More globally, amid the worldwide protests against police brutality and institutional racism towards people of African descent following the murder of George Floyd, white social media "influencers" used blackface to attempt to show their support for the Black Lives Matter movement. 7

This special issue, however, does not aim to map all the recent instances of blackface and racist imagery in Europe. Rather, inspired by Black feminist and queer of colour emphasis on experiential knowledge, we are interested in asking: what does it mean for Black people to encounter and resist

blackface and other racist imagery on a daily basis in various European contexts? Our editorial initiates such an inquiry with the recounting of two of our own stories of encounters with blackface.

Bel's encounter: Zwarte Piet at the post office

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 dehumanize 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, but 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 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. Still, however uncomfortable and momentarily out of place the assistant 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, cheerily. But not on that day. Not today. Never again.

Noémi's encounter: Blackface at the race

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 prioritized 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 dehumanization to have a good time?"

As shown by our stories, being Black, or of colour, and encountering blackface means experiencing unease, sadness, isolation and/or criminalization. Encountering blackface and other forms of daily racism⁸ means the disruption of one's mundane and daily routines, such as going to the post office, or taking part in one of the most popular public races of one's city. It means feeling heavily apart from the dominant ways of feeling and being within the white majoritarian public. Back in 2014, both of us wanted to unpack such encounters: we wanted to make sense of them against the backdrop of critical analyses and historicization. We wanted to gather and put in conversation accounts of resistance to blackface. We thus decided to conceive and organize a conference.

Returning the Gaze: a conference turned into a journal issue

The *Returning the Gaze: Blackface in Europe* conference took place in Amsterdam, in November 2014⁹ and was the brainchild of the two of us alongside the activist-scholar Karlijn Volke who was a long-time collaborator of Bel in researching European anti-blackface movements. The three of us were, at the time, founding and/or active members of the Anti-Golliwog Facebook group, ¹⁰ a lively social media platform that mobilized and gathered numerous anti-racist campaigners and thinkers from across the globe who shared their experiences with and proposed resolutions for dealing with blackface and other racist imageries and artefacts. These (virtual) interactions were the first inspirations for what would later become the basis for the conference: a platform where activists, students, scholars and artists could converge to discuss racist imagery safely, receive comfort, encouragement and support, as well as build counter-strategies.

Blackface is a concrete and explicit illustration of the mechanisms of anti-Black racism in Europe; it is at the heart of the work of many movements, scholars and artistic creators. However, as Cecile Emeke has emphasized in her web series *Strolling*, Afropean experiences and struggles remain scattered across Europe. Our conference was aimed at regrouping otherwise scattered voices and experiences, thus we conceptualized an event that would place anti-blackface stakeholders in dialogue with one another. The point would be to firmly focalize on Europe, stepping away from US-centric discourses,

and instigating a platform to establish philosophies, strategies and vocabularies around specifically European issues and histories.

With these key aims in mind, a working team of volunteers came together throughout 2013 and 2014. It was of paramount importance for the material to be inclusive and accessible. In total, fifteen contributors from eight countries presented their efforts to work against image-based racism, for one day in Amsterdam. It could not have been a more timely gathering, held during the month of November, which is the now infamous Dutch Sinterklaas period, where rampant anti-Black racism via the use of the blackface character Zwarte Piet is common-place. The conference also took place on the eve of the beginning of the decade for people of African descent (launched in 2015 by the UN, who incidentally also had declared use of Zwarte Piet in the Netherlands racist the same year). In short, the event itself was an act of resistance, meant to inspire further efforts against blackface practices.

In the Spring of 2014, the *European Race and Imagery Foundation* (ERIF) was formed from the organising committee of the event. Part of this formation encouraged the team to think about work that could and should be done following the 2014 conference. Amongst other projects, ERIF chose the medium of a special issue with *darkmatter Journal* to maintain a community archive of the conference, in order to ensure that the messages and ideas shared could reach a much wider audience, as well as showcasing the critical and timely work of the contributors. Containing six adapted contributions that were presented at the original event, this special issue captures powerfully the spirit of the moment the conference created, while also summarizing the variation, passion, urgency and complexity of the voices, aims and efforts present within the contemporary European anti-racism struggle.

As these contributions were part of a broader conversation, we would like to briefly recount the work of the participants, who are not featured in this special issue. Ulrich Pallua focused on the early-modern usage of blackface in British pantomime performances, and Dorothea Dentler discussed the meaning of blackface usage within the German theatre context by examining and exploring contemporary debates on the topic. Joanna Rubin Dranger discussed actions being taken by campaigners against racist imagery and stereotypes in children's picture books and literature in Sweden. Also addressing imagery and narratives directed towards children was school teacher Marlise Achterbergh, whose *Prinses Nina* book tells the same-gender-loving, interracial love story of two princesses. Nana Adusei-Poku' elaborated on the intersections of race, gender and fashion within visual cultural discourses to address how Black artists have been able to use their work to subvert white supremacist, and specifically anti-Black imagery. Meanwhile, Danish anthropologist Siri Venning focused on more traditional forms of activism with regards to the now notorious Zwarte Piet character in the Netherlands.

All of these presentations illustrated that blackface has been, and continues to be, pervasive across time and space in Europe. Blackface and Black caricatural artefacts, such as the pantomime, have been circulating in Europe for many years before the 19th century, for example in the form of the Morris or *morisco* dance in the British Isles. Such evidence goes against the apologist argument that (racial) blackface is merely a 19th century US invention, with no roots in Europe - a popular and ahistorical argument put forth to diminish the presence of people of African descent in Europe. The attempt to erase Black Europeans from Eurocentric memory continues, even as mainstream scholars, such as David Olusuga, publish and illustrate proof of our presence and cultural influence. Nonetheless, as we have highlighted above, blackface and other racist imageries have been, and continue to be, found in popular events, such as end of the year festivities and children books but also within elitist cultural fields such as high fashion or contemporary theater.

The contributions in this special issue further demonstrate how blackface permeates most European contexts, leading us to associate this practice with the "dark face of Europe". With the notion of the dark face, we want to point towards that aspect of Europe's modern identity, which is deeply formative, but also constantly denied, un-assumed, un-addressed: race. European modes of belonging, notions of the "human" and the political have been informed by the colonial, capitalist, cis-heteronormative and ableist idea of race. Under such perspectives, blackface and anti-Black racist imagery constitute an important point of entry for anti-racist analyses and struggles. Maintaining a strong link with the chosen location (Amsterdam) of the first conference (and anti-Zwarte Piet resistance-driven reasons for doing so), this special issue opens and closes with contributions from the Netherlands. In the closing text, the artist and activist Gloria Holwerda-Williams coins the expression (de)facing to put emphasis on Black liberatory artistic practices in the Netherlands. Following her conceptualization, we consider that each piece of this special issue constitutes an attempt to (de)face anti-Black racism in Europe.

Blackface in Europe: silencing, consuming and affecting

The contributions by Patricia Schor, Noémi Michel and Karina Griffith articulate theoretical observations with the empirical discussion of the concrete ways that blackface operates as a mechanism of controlling Black communities and other people of colour throughout Europe. Adding to critical race theories and anti-racist and/or feminist methodologies, these contributions not only enable us to better understand the complex power operations that sustain blackface practices - they also offer venues for challenging these forms of disempowering dehumanization.

Recent work by Fatima El-Tayeb, Gloria Wekker, Sara Ahmed and David Theo Goldberg emphasizes how the silencing of Blacks' and peoples of colour's protests against racism is a fundamental drive in the reproduction and naturalization of racist violence in contemporary Europe. ¹⁷ In dialogue with this

scholarship, Schor's and Michel's articles both historicize and reveal how the politics of blackface take part in the ongoing forceful politics of silencing Blacks' and people of colour's resistance. Through her discourse analysis of the 2013 debate over Zwarte Piet character, Schor exposes the inherent racism and xenophobia of the Dutch institutions that continue to support anti-Black behaviour during the Netherlands' largest festival. In her analysis, silencing is enforced through spatial segregation and racist tropes reproduced by the Dutch white public, institutions, media and authorities, who converge in what she calls "fencing the Black body within"; namely in containing the tangible and political movements of Black people in the Netherlands.

Michel tracks the journey of a letter sent by anti-racist scholars to a human rights' organization based in Switzerland in order to call out the latter's use of blackface in a campaign against xenophobia. Revealing the paradoxes of *neoliberal humanitarianism*, this contribution shows how good intentions, when sustained by white innocence and colonial amnesia, (re)produce racism and block effective anti-racism. In following the protest letter around, Michel reveals manifold logics of silencing, showing for instance how the addressees of the protest use the spatial proximity of the anti-racist protesters as a way to divert the latter's demands and consume their energy.

Michel and Schor provide close readings of two texts that undergo very different destinies. On the one hand, the 2013 Mayor of Amsterdam's letter, which authorizes the Zwarte Piet parade and dismisses the anti-blackface demands, receives an award. On the other, the anti-blackface letter of the Swiss activist-scholars fails to raise awareness amongst its targets, and becomes a trap even against its authors. Read together, Michel and Schor reveal the shortcomings of the liberal regime of democratic discussion based on the myth of equal voices for each part. Rather, current public debates in Europe remain based upon racialized asymmetries enforced throughout the long history of colonialism and slavery, which continue to mark Black people as outside the realm of the reasonable subjects of political speech. Under such a racialized logic, Black anti-racism becomes associated with excessive and threatening protest, whereas white voices are constantly erected on the side of tolerance, innocence and superior knowledge and morality.

Furthermore, by highlighting the material and affective effects of contemporary debates over blackface, Michel and Schor provide us with an original and often overlooked association between silencing and consumption: "Blackface, both as a practice and as an object of debate, not only consumes the attributes of people marked by racial difference, but also the very energies necessary to contest that violent consumption", writes Michel. The "debate centred over Zwarte Piet enforces [an] economy of racial containment and discipline of the racialized and sexualized, unruly and excessive bodies", writes Schor. When Black subjects see their attributes consumed as spectacles, the spectacle also obfuscates their real presence and ability to be listened to, as Fanon put it in *Black skin*, *White masks*: "I cannot go to a film without seeing myself. I wait for me." 18

Blackface not only silences and consumes, it also intensely affects and impresses everyone with specific emotions. In such a perspective, the reparation of centuries of blackface by whites must also take into account what Berlin-based Canadian filmmaker and scholar Karina Griffith calls the repayment of the "debt of feeling". She writes that "Blackface deals in the counterfeit currency of Black affects", and "produces an abundance of fake Black emotions through performance". Her piece revisits the making and reception of her experimental short film "DIE UMZÜGE/Crude Processions" (2013), which focused on blackface practices during the Cologne Carnival, juxtaposed with imagery of Afro-Latin people in Salvador de Bahia, Brazil, Buenos Aires, Argentina and Montevideo, Uruguay - bringing to mind the Black Atlantic. The film was scripted as an interplay between four emotions: fear, confusion, anger and compassion oriented towards "Black spectators of her black authored films". By subtly enmeshing the registers of the ethnographic, the philosophical and the filmographic, Griffith's account holds space for Black people. It offers words, images and feelings for us to really realise how blackface affects us. Griffith's piece amplifies the "nod", the mundane recognition between Black people, offering a contrast to the racist framing of the European dominant mode of discussing blackface highlighted by Michel and Schor.

The spatial politics of anti-Black imagery in contemporary Europe

Resistance to blackface must be inscribed in the broader context of resistance to racist imagery in Europe. Mainstream commentators often dismiss concerns regarding imagery, by setting up a hierarchy amongst anti-racist issues. Discrimination in the job market or the health system, they claim, matters more than racist artefacts in the public space or in children's books. The second round of contributions by Vanessa Eileen Thompson, Gloria Holwerda-Williams and the two of us in conversation with Darren Chetty and Kayha Engler, disrupt such dismissive and often uninformed arguments. They all connect the politics of (anti-)Black imagery to the many dimensions of racism. The struggle against racist representation emerges as one nodal point of the multifaceted struggle "for the recognition and memorialization of the enslavement of Black people, reparations for colonial crimes and enslavements, against police violence, against representational violence in the media, public and educational institutions as well as anti-Black racism in the housing and job markets", as listed by Thompson.

The pieces show that reflexivity and situated knowledge are the best perspectives for sketching out the logics and implications of current representational violence against Black people and people of colour. They convince us of the paramount importance of subaltern modes of knowledge production (i.e. decolonial, critical race, critical Black and post-colonial) that remains overlooked in white academia. Thompson frames the issues of importance in her research with the French Black activists she participated with, in order to "engage with the collective as knowledge producers and political interlocutors". Holwerda-Williams' multi-media assemblage of Black artists' work against racism in

the Netherland reminds us that theory and analysis can be limited when it comes to making sense of the ways past and present racism haunt all of us; that poetic, visual and sonic expressions are of equal importance in conveying the "graven voices of past lives of the misused humans". The conversation between a teacher and a mother helps us to forge multiple situated and complementary narratives about childrens' exposure to racist imagery. Another original contribution of each of these three pieces is the way they each link imagery with spatial configurations: the city space in Thompson's piece; the classroom and the school in the discussion between Chetty and Engler and public streets and art spaces in Holwerda-Williams' piece.

Throughout the 2014 conference, imagery that is specifically targeted at children was a topic of great concern, being raised in some way during each panel. Both Chetty and Engler gave presentations about their work for the *Children and Racial Imagery* panel, which focused mainly on children's literature and picture books. During the subsequent interview with them for this special issue, Chetty and Engler discussed the impact racialized and neo-colonial imagery and narratives can have on Black children, how teachers and parents can become activists within the school setting, as well as the role educational institutions play in shaping normative world-views. Both highlight that due to childrens' presumed innocence, teachers and parents alike oftentimes do not *hear* their children to the extent that they should. Discourses about the "pupil voice", suggests Chetty, should also emphasize the "teacher ear", whereas Engler recommends that parent activists stay creative, look after themselves and their children and recognize that change is slow. Moreover, Chetty and Engler's conversation relies on Barry Troyna's "saris, steel pans and samosas" 19 - this creative alliteration gesturing towards the superficiality and futility of empty multiculturalist practices in schools.

Continuing the ethnographic perspectives, Thompson provides an original theorizing of the links between space, gendered race, class and imagery. In the spirit of critical race, critical Black, post-colonial and decolonial interventions, she offers accounts of European anti-racism and decoloniality by reflecting on (and having participated in) the work of the Brigade Anti-Negrophobie (BAN) based in France, focusing on their action for the removal of a giant colonial storefront in Paris comprising the N-word and the image of an enslaved servant. Thompson's account from within makes BAN's activism tangible. Her account also highlights the many racist disqualifications faced by the activists during their actions and under the broader context of the deliberate de-racialization of French vocabulary and statistics, echoing Michel's and Schor's articles about the pitfalls of anti-racialism. She analyses the "t-shirt as a weapon" as the BAN all wore customized t-shirts bearing the name of their collective during their campaign. In this way, Thompson also highlights the importance of a strong statement under which anti-racist actors can galvanize, comparable to the use of Quinsy Gario's 2011 slogan "Zwarte Piet is Racisme", worn on t-shirts in the Netherlands to campaign against blackface (as is explored by Holwerda-Williams and Schor). Furthermore, Thompson's article illustrates the role of

political Blackness and alliance building, in order to contextualize the BAN's work in the broader Francophone activism landscape.

As Thompson's article lays out salient and material campaign methods and intentions, Holwerda-Williams' contribution provides a multi-media visual and textual archive of Black Dutch artistic activism. Holwerda-Williams - artist, activist, scholar and educator - delivered stand out moments for both of ERIF's conferences with her *A Sint You Want* intervention-performances. ²⁰ Alongside *A Sint You Want* - a radical queering of traditional Sinterklaas imagery, effectively halting white-cis-het patriarchy in its tracks - Holwerda-Williams' contribution provides readers and viewers of this special issue with an artistic contribution in and of itself, as well as a compelling advancement in the discourses around belonging, democracy and decolonization in Europe.

When we people Return the Gaze

A number of tangible and mutually-relatable strategies emerge from re-reading the contributions alongside each other. In terms of more obvious direct responses to the title of the conference (i.e. returning the gaze), Holdwera-Williams shows the way her body deployed in performance temporarily subverts white-het-cis gazes in order to re-imagine Blackness. Meanwhile, Griffith centres the voices and emotions of Black people when confronted with the spectacle of blackface through her filmmaking process itself, as well as her scholarly reflections of it.

Engler and Chetty's contribution re-tells numerous strategies and solutions they have put into place as parent and teacher respectively, to make schools safer spaces for Black children. Examples from Engler's case include encouraging more representative books in libraries and discussing the politics of representation directly with her son on a regular basis. Chetty stresses teachers' responsibility to dismantle the idle glorification of apologetic nationalist narratives in curriculums, as well as teacher's ear: i.e. actively hearing children, while in the process of teaching them.

Re-tracing the unsettling affects her co-authored anti-blackface letter caused, Michel formulates alternatives to the tradition of face-to-face encounters. She suggests that anti-racist work is also about energetic resistance which can be safeguarded through condensation of anti-racist forces and through safe distance. Schor demonstrates how protestors wearing the "Zwarte Piet is Racisme" t-shirt (from 2011 onwards) have come to tacitly personify the "killjoys of national racial pleasure". The protestors' courageous mobilization of a slogan on a t-shirt, to disrupt so-called white spaces, relates strongly to the interventions described in Thompson's article, which is particularly timely as it emphasizes the functionality of strategic *conviviality* from the perspective of French campaigners' political actions against anti-Black racism.

Collectively, the various parts of this special issue re-emphasize the overarching mission and vision of the conference. In short, to put anti-racist stakeholders across Europe in dialogue with each other, in order to reveal conceptual, grass-roots and practical methods that contribute towards dismantling one of the most conspicuous examples of white supremacy: blackface.

Journal Issue Preview Image and Editorial Preview Image Credit: @Boluca

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Dr. Bel Parnell-Berry is a community organiser and researcher originally from the UK and currently based in the Netherlands. She has a background in anthropology, political science and market research; her main area of interest is the normative construction of minority groups through (policy) discourses and audio-visual culture(s). Furthermore, alongside her research she works within activist communities to assist with the creation and maintenance of campaign platforms, namely as the current chair of the <u>European Race and Imagery Foundation</u> (ERIF). For more about her work, visit her website.

Dr. Noémi Michel is an activist, anti-racist and feminist scholar. She is a member of the <u>European Race and Imagery Foundation</u> (ERIF), as well as of the <u>Collectif Faites des Vagues</u> (based in Geneva). She is a senior lecturer in political theory at the Department of Political Science of the University of Geneva. Her research and teaching interests are in the areas of post-colonial and critical race theory, with a focus on diasporic Black feminist thought. Her recent work has been published in *Critical Horizons*, *Postcolonial studies* and *Social politics*. Her current research explores on the one hand conflicting grammars of anti-racism in European public debates and institutions, and on the other Black feminist theorization of political voice.

Footnotes

- 1. Sophie Morris, "The origin of morris dancers blacking up is irrelevant it simply needs to stop," *The Guardian*, August 12, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/aug/12/origin-morris-dancing-blacking-up-irrelevant.

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- 2. Little Britain was, incidentally, recently removed from the BBC iPlayer, Netflix and BritBox streaming platforms due to the show's usage of blackface in its sketches. Toby Moses, "Little Britain remove from BBC iPlayer, Netflix and BritBox due to use of blackface," The Guardian, June 9, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2020/jun/09/little-britain-removed-from-bbc-iplayer-netflix-and-britbox-blackface. Lunatics premiered on Netflix in 2019. Micha Frazer-Carroll, "We were raised on blackface TV, but there's no excuse for Chris Lilley's new show," gal-dem, April 19, 2019, https://gal-dem.com/we-were-raised-on-blackface-tv-but-theres-no-excuse-for-chris-lilleys-new-show/. =
- 3. These mainstream forms of entertainment encourage personal initiatives to participate in blackface, for instance the Scottish mother who dressed her daughter up as a "lookie lookie man" for Halloween, complete with full bodied blackface. Lisa Toner, "I'm not racist' Scots mum who blacked up daughter for Halloween defends 'creative' dress up," *Daily Record*, November 1, 2018, https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/scottish-news/im-not-racist-scots-mum-13518517?
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