Digital Blackface and Memetic Ambiguity

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Memes as Happy Objects of White Supremacy

Some memes, "[b]y fate, or like magic" (Jackson 2019, 88), manage to extend their lifespan against the ephemerality of the internet, writes Lauren Michele Jackson in her 2019 book *White Negroes*, which followed her legendary article in *Teen Vogue* two years earlier. In this article, she had introduced the terminology of digital blackface to a large audience and described it as an embodiment practice of Blackness that, in reference to the minstrelsy tradition in the USA, depicts the racist sentiments of society online (Jackson 2017). Alongside games, TikTok videos, emojis, etc., memes are a genre of digital blackface. They circulate primarily in the form of so-called reaction images as embodiments of Blackness: these memes, which draw on the visual archive of Black facial expressions and gestures to illustrate and communicate a feeling, are the form of performative appropriation of Blackness or Black as performance transferred to the internet globally. According to Jackson, the popularity of such reaction images is often linked to their short-lived nature: as quickly as some memes with titles such as "Crying Jordan," "Damn, Daniel," "Sweet Brown" appear, they are gone, "just like that" (ibid., 87). However, some never fade away because they are "too attuned to our baser sensibilities" (ibid., 88).

This is the case with the "You Get a Car" meme[1] at the center here, which has resisted the online logic of transience since 2004 and returns at regular intervals. This meme, which medializes Oprah Winfrey's outburst of joy in her 2004 television show and exaggerates Black female affect as grotesque, does not fade because it touches on racism as a basic sentiment. However, unlike Jackson, I would like to claim that it is not so much the baser sensibilities that this meme appeals to. Rather, I am interested in examining it as an example of a dynamic that—especially in the context of the US—*produces* the meme

* Parts of this article were published in German under the title "Meme(tische) Gespenster" (Köppert 2025a).

1 See "Oprah's 'You Get a Car,'" n. d.

in analogy to the historically generated, racist idea of Blackness as something inferior in order to create a feeling of superiority, of *white*[2] supremacy. It is precisely in this constitutive dynamic that the feeling of happiness associated with memes can be located. This was only revived in 2024, when Oprah Winfrey amused an entire room at the 29th Critics Choice Awards with just a small reference to the "You Get a Car" meme.

"Oprah Winfrey pays homage to THAT iconic 'you get a car' meme as she takes the stage in slinky dress that showcases slim figure after weight loss drug use," headlined the *Daily Mail* the day after Winfrey's appearance at the 29th Critics Choice Awards on January 15, 2024 (Daily Mail 2024). Winfrey, in her introduction speech for Best Actor, wished she could tell the audience "You get a trophy, you get a trophy, and you get a trophy." This smiling allusion to the most parodied moment in television history,[3] according to the *Daily Mail*, when Winfrey gave everyone in the audience a new car by shouting "You get a car" in her 2004 show, immediately sparked amusement and laughter among those present at the awards ceremony. The laughter probably proves the virality of the "You Get a Car" meme, which was created twenty years ago, and the sustainable effectiveness of this meme in a digital culture that is fast-moving and tends to forget. The transgenerational longevity of the so-called Oprah meme (Köppert 2022, 227) refers to a certain extent to the hypermemetic culture in which (political, public) discourses are shaped by memes in the long term—and no longer limited to the USA (von Gehlen 2020, 50). Memes, for that matter, prove to be happy objects and are symptomatic of the affective discourse that determines them normatively. This means that with the circulation of the meme as a cultural object, archives and discourses that tend to amass unhappiness are associated with pleasure and thus take on the form of happiness. Sara Ahmed refers specifically to heterosexual marriage as an archive of (economic, legal, etc.) unhappiness for women, which however—circulating as a happy object—stands for (phantasmatic) happiness (2010, 31). Memes serve as a promise of happiness too, which is important for heteronormative and—as will be seen—*white* discourses. And indeed, the literature on memes is permeated by questions of humor (Moebius 2018, Dargiewicz 2022, Nowotny and Reidy 2022), wit (von Gehlen 2020), the frivolous (Galip 2021), the exaggerated masquerade (King 2021). Even when their polarizing and destructive power takes

2 I use italics to emphasize the social construction of the category of whiteness. However, based on the social constructivist approach, I choose to capitalize Blackness to account for lived or embodied experiences, particularly in the context of antiracist resistance movements (see Eggers et al. 2005).

3 See "Oprah Winfrey Pays Homage," 2024.

center stage in the context of right-wing instrumentalizations, memetic irony is an essential point of reference.

The joyful excitement in the audience of the 29th Critics Choice Awards makes it clear how sticky—in Ahmed's terms—happiness is and how intensely the feeling of entertainment is attached to a meme though it has long since been discussed publicly and critically in the context of digital blackface (see Daily Mail 2021). So the question is: What idea of the world, what political discourse is formed when, despite the brutal history of blackface reproduced in the meme, the desire for happiness is articulated in the laughter of the audience? Which chapter of history wants to be kept affectively open here, and why? What role do memes play in their mediality and to what extent are they a medium for delaying an affective closure. And to what extent can this delay be understood as exemplary of how race is also produced through its connection with technology (Chun 2009)? So how can memes be understood as technologies in which race is performed, and performed differentially? To approach these questions, I will first discuss digital blackface as the subject of a digital image culture of "affect as racialization" (Blickstein 2019). The second part will then deal with memes as ghosts and, in this context, as machines of Blackness or as Black technical objects according to Ramon Amaro (2022), but also of Black techno-conjuring according to Ezekiel Dixon-Román (2021). Particularly with regard to Black techno-conjuring, I would like to discuss the tension between memetic haunting and its potential for undoing racist violence and redress (Dixon-Román 2021, 5). Even though it will be issued very late in this article and is still quite cursory here, though more elaborated elsewhere (Köppert 2025a, 2025c), I would like to deal with practices of resignifying colonial and racist histories of blackface and ethnic drag and highlight the question of how digital blackface can be decolonized in the second part of this text.

Digital Blackface—Navigating Crises

The primarily *white* audience, which reacted with amusement in 2024 in memory of the "You Get a Car" meme that has been distributed and modified on a massive scale since 2004, kept an affective space open in which blackface is not a trigger for criticism or indignation. On the contrary: digital blackface can be understood as part of a boom in the affective navigation of various crises in which whiteness emotionally finds itself, contrary to all facts of still being privileged. By updating a meme that is exemplary for digital blackface, control can be established over everyday life, which increasingly threatens to slip away in the face of political conflicts, climate change and social injustice. Within such a *white* emotional culture the invoked meme is then less of a

"province of meaning" that can be used to leave the dominant everyday world in a carnivalesque manner (Moebius 2018, 6). Rather, it seems to me that the grotesquely exaggerated emotional outburst in the meme becomes a medium for instantiating a controlled and controllable everyday life at the moment of its revival during the award ceremony. If everyday life is perceived as a circus, then the meme once again has the function of providing stability. Blackface provides *white* stability and is actualized—especially since the Black Lives Matter protests and the toppling of colonial-racist monuments in the US context and beyond—for the purpose of self-affirmation and *white* happiness in the field of digital culture. Central to such an assertion are 1) the medial racialization of affect, to be discussed here as memetic distortion (defacement) and animation of the face; and 2) the appropriability of affect, which in the context of the media history of amateur photography refers to the colonial-racist logic of fungibility (Hartman 1997).

Memetic Defacement

The deranged face captured in the "You Get a Car" meme and the grotesquely overdrawn laugh that exposes Winfrey's teeth can be understood as visualizations of blackface on a motivic level. Alongside the blackening of skin, the toothy smile is one of the most important topoi of racist Othering, which became part of US-American mass culture in the form of minstrel shows in the nineteenth century and spread internationally in the course of transmedial translation into photography and film in the twentieth century. On the level of meme-specific characteristics, the montage of the image's motif with text, but also the loop in the GIF version,[4] function like an additional animation of the face. From a historical perspective, the meme reproduces the racialization of affect or the affective charge of racism via animation (Blickstein 2019).

In his racist pamphlet *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), Thomas Jefferson described the Black face as an immovable veil that was incapable of any emotion (quoted in Yao 2021, 18). Frustration with this opacity of the face informed the dehumanizing discourse of Black subjects' inherent insensitivity. As a result of this frustration, the overemphasis on liveliness or affectability generated by blackface in the minstrel shows showed the supposedly Black subject as affected, not to prove their humanity, but to visibly emphasize that Black affect was different, abject and less valuable (Ngai 2015, 95, see also Chen 2012 and

4 See the GIF at https://i.kym-cdn.com/entries/icons/original/000/012/809/oprah-free-car.gif, accessed May 15, 2024.

Köppert 2022, 231).[5] The grotesque exaggeration of affect as a characteristic of blackface—for example, the oversized, laughing mouth and gesticulating hands—is obviously repeated in Winfrey's meme.

The animation, which is either created by short agitating text messages that are mounted over the image or played as a GIF, is, beyond the distorted face, a technological condition of the racialization of affect as animatedness (see Ngai 2015). This means two things:

1) In a meme, the image is animated on the basis of the text, insofar as the image becomes a story, which in most cases of "You Get a Car" memes known to me has an innervating character. Winfrey appears either as an apocalyptic oracle (You Get the Flu!) or an inciting hate preacher (You Go to Hell!) and is thus associated with the image of the over-emotionally racialized subject who is in turmoil (Ngai 2015, 91).

2) The GIF in turn animates by means of editing and looping. The Black female body is magically set in motion by the invisible cut, but is trapped in this movement due to the loop. Following Sianne Ngai's (ibid., 100) remarks on early animated film and its racialization, it could be said that the GIF version of the Winfrey meme functions in the ambiguity of showing an uncontrollable body that is at the same time immobile. With the GIF, emotional vivacity and mechanistic containment coincide once again. Similar to what Rey Chow (1993) states for early film, it seems to me that the ambiguity does not coincidentally conflate with the moment in which digital image culture begins to take shape in the twenty-first century. However, I believe that, contrary to what Chow claims for the film, memes do not only use the Black body *to show* that in the digital age the human being is an automaton in which social injustice and mechanization processes take on a life of their own in an uncontrolled manner. Rather, the memes/GIFs are integrative technologies of a digital culture that *carry out* the automation of the Black body and at the same time capture the transgressive potential of the emancipation of Blackness.

It is not only the loop that holds the ecstatic movement captive; many of the texts also function according to the principle of calling up Blackness as threatening and controlling it at the same time: many variations of the "You Get a Car" meme catch up with the threatening invocation of the "You" through the more metaphysically universalizing "Everyone." The meme thus accomplishes within its elements what had functioned—as Evelyn Annuß (2014, 68) has

5 In this context, it is interesting to note that the abolitionists had previously also worked with dramatizations of animation—with the aim of recoding dehumanization. As Sianne Ngai points out, the fact that Black people were animated like dolls for the purpose of achieving this is just another form of objectification (see Ngai 2005, 99).

argued—partitioned on stage and backstage in 1920s film, particularly in *The Jazz Singer* (1927). The stage as a site of blackfacing, the disfiguring of expression through the comic-like exaggeration of mouth, eyes, and hands, was crucial to integrating into the dominant *white* culture of the US, which had been symbolized in the film by the backstage space occupied exclusively by *white* people. In relation to the meme, it seems to me that with the allusion to "Everyone," the backstage as a metaphor of the invisible but universalized *white* dominant culture enters the visible field of the stage. Whiteness no longer operates out of its unmarkedness, but explicitly communicates itself within the meme as the principle of everyone, which keeps the supposedly threatening potential of the appeal associated with the Black female body ("you") under control. If *white* normativity in film was derived from the hidden everydayness of the backstage, so that it could remain invisible behind the black mask during the carnivalesque stage spectacle, in the context of digital cultures it is pushed visibly into the picture as "Everyone." The "You Get a Car" meme therefore seems to me to be a technology for regaining a supposedly lost control, which, in contrast to the historical blackface in the film, is not based on invisible ventriloquism, but must take place on an open stage—on the digital stage of the meme.

Memetic Fungibility

Previously unmentioned, but also relevant for the "You Get a Car" meme, is the logic of transferability. The "You Get a Car" meme is exemplary for the way in which Black people's facial expressions and gestures are depicted, which—collaged with text or animated in the case of GIFs—are used by *white* people for reaction images, for example on X (formerly Twitter), to express a feeling or make a joke.[6] This imitation or transmission of emotional expression generated in the use and distribution of images as an emotional reaction or commentary corresponds to the "absolute fungibility" (Palmer 2017, 38, see also Palmer 2020) of Black people's affective articulations. The appropriability and consumability of Black people's affective expression—created under the auspices of elaborate constructions—for the communication of their own feelings marks the structural position that Blackness has historically occupied for subjectivation within *white* supremacy and repeatedly fills in the context of digital image cultures. The practice of transferring visibly affected Blackness to the communicative actions of *white* people on social media platforms can be understood as the

6 See Katrin Köppert and Simon Strick's research project "Digital Blackface: Racialized Affect Patterns of the Digital," funded by the Volkswagen Foundation.

ability of *whiteness* to possess Black affect and to not being called into question in its own articulation of feeling.

Tanya Sheehan (2014) has demonstrated this appropriation in the US history of private amateur and snapshot photography. After the toothy smile was attributed to the Black body shortly after the abolition of slavery in order to discipline it (photographically), it was later adopted by the *white* middle class in self-portraits. In order to free themselves from the social restrictions of sentimental inwardness, the toothy smile was used in the private photography of the *white* bourgeoisie at the beginning of the twentieth century, using racially charged watermelon slices held in front of the face or body as a "prosthetic grin" (ibid., 149). In the following, I would like to argue that the "You Get a Car" meme mirrors this history of amateur photography in digital space, yet transforms it. With the adoption of the affective transgression of Black people produced as a stereotype, a vitalization of the users takes place, which, however, coincides with the moment when the power of *whiteness* is increasingly affirmed again (Alt-Right, Trump, etc.). So even if it can be assumed that the constructed stereotype of Black expression is appropriated in the sense of a desire for the associated intensity of feelings with the reaction image, this does not mean that the hegemonic feeling of *white* interiority is called into question. As Tanya Sheehan writes, following Saidiya V. Hartman (1997):

> such appropriation did much more than imagine blackness as an "abject and degraded condition"; it fulfilled a "desire to don, occupy, or possess blackness or the black body as a sentimental resource and/or locus of excess enjoyment" without compromising the audience's "serious" performances of whiteness and respectability elsewhere. (2014, 146)

In light of this history of amateur photography, the Black body turns into an emotional resource for the production and balancing of one's own feelings.

Digital blackface in the form of reaction images also seems to tie in with the history of minstrel shows, which after the abolition of slavery in the US took on the function of defining *white* feeling—with the effect of pointing out to Black people "their place" in society. Winfrey's meme seems to be an example of a present in which Black people are once again being referred to their place, albeit in a different media-specific setting, and thus excluded from the affective register of *white* supremacy, perhaps especially in the case of a Black woman like Oprah Winfrey, who has generated a great deal of economic and cultural capital.

The reference to minstrel shows makes it possible to point out the difference to the media history of snapshot photography: Whereas the appropriation

of the toothy smile was popularized in the medium of snapshot photography and celebrated in the context of family rituals in front of the camera, with the memetic use and distribution of the exaggerated feeling of happiness we are witnessing the publicizing of a once private media use. On the one hand, this testifies to the diffusion of privacy and the public sphere that has gone hand in hand with digitalization and, on the other, to the transformation of everyday life into a stage, into a show—in which, however, it is not the state of exception but affective normality that is to be established.

The meme, which I discussed in this first part as an example of digital blackface in the context of affect theory, is an example of a digital image culture in which affects are racialized in the form of animation and transmission and distributed as media for the production of *white* supremacy. I would now like to focus on it as an object that is not only racially charged, but also represents a technology of race. On the one hand, I am interested in the extent to which the meme can be understood as a specter that haunts the internet and digital culture as a reminder of the colonial history of dehumanization. On the other hand, I am interested in looking at this haunting in its antiracist potentials of undoing and reparation.

Memetic Specters

The introduction to the *Critical Meme Reader* I (2021) states that memes combine two types of domination: that of social subjugation at the level of signification and that of machine domination at the level of asignification (Arkenbout and Scherz 2021, 10).[7] While on the one hand they act on the basis of ideology and interpellation, on the other they act by means of deterritorialized codes or signs outside of a reference to human subjectivity. Insofar as the nonrepresentative logic takes precedence within information and computer technology, memes can also be understood as media that are less powerful due to their content than their machinic dimension. Due to this asignifying dimension, they are referred to in the introduction as "mutating energy" (ibid., 11), as "bastard" (ibid., 8), "informational obesity" (ibid., 11), or "perverse delight" (ibid.).

I want to argue that these classifications mark memes as technologies of race, that is, as technologies organized around the presupposition of racist categorizations, as Ramon Amaro (2022, 13) explicates using the example of machine learning. The meme is thus operative at the level of a machinic

7 This paragraph is based in part on my text "Meme(tische) Gespenster," published in German (Köppert 2025a).

dimension whose attributions as "perverse," "obese," and "mutated" repeat the racist history in which technology was constituted on the basis of Blackness as an abstraction of signification. Memes are thus haunted by a history that links Blackness to asignification or objecthood and to the associated pleasure in the spectacle of the other and the monstrous. This spectacularization of Blackness as an object or apparatus in the context of minstrelsy, which is decisive for the history of technology, has been demonstrated by Louis Chude-Sokei (2016), among others, using the example of Joice Heth. In *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics*, he describes how in 1835 P. T. Barnum, an American showman and "pioneer" of the "modern circus," presented Heth, a Black enslaved woman, alongside the most famous machine of the time—the Mechanical Turk chess machine—for the purpose of spectacle and curiosity in Boston (2016, 21—26). In this demonstration, Heth is shown as an apparatus, whereas the machine of the Mechanical Turk is insinuated as human-like. The uncanny valley of similarity between human and machine is traversed by means of an image of Black femininity (ibid., 23), which stands for the dissimilarity or mutation of an understanding of computers that can be apostrophized with signification (see also Köppert 2025b). The dissimilarity that is required in relation to similarity in order to accept technology instead of humans is generated by the fact that Black femininity is performed as machinic in the sense of a wooden surface or affective opacity. This opacity is important for the asignifying contagion or machinic subjugation of the human being. What is left out is the association of Black femininity with the system of machinic signification or the idea of a computer capable of inner depth.

With reference to the meme as mutating energy in the sense of asignification, the digital present is haunted by this history of minstrelsy and the meme is the specter of this performative dehumanization. As such, it does not operate on the level of what can be seen in the meme, but what can be affectively perceived with the meme without having to be aware of it (Dixon-Román 2021). Following Ezekiel Dixon-Román, it could be said that I am interested in the "haunting logics of colonialism in the epistemology of [meme]-technology" and the question of the extent to which blackface, also with regard to memes, "represents the link between centuries and the primary manifestation of a racialized version of what counts as the uncanny" (Chude-Sokei 2016, 15)—"that unsettling sense of familiarity and difference as when we encounter dolls, masks, anthropomorphized machines, and … blacks in a time when their humanity continued to be in question" (ibid., 15).

The question is to what extent the uncanniness that accompanies the meme as a ghost of colonial-racist pasts is also the condition of the possibility of addressing reparation and thus reorientation (Dixon-Román 2021, 5). The unsettling feeling of affectively registering something familiar—blackface

minstrelsy—with the "You Get a Car" meme recursively unfolds Blackness as a asignifying apparatus and affecting spectacle. According to Ezekiel Dixon-Román, however, this temporality of recursion that is central to haunting is not characterized by a self-identical repetition (ibid., 4). Instead, due to recursion, it is enriched with contingencies and indecisions. In this sense, haunting conditions the possibility for the transformative power of the creative indecision of Blackness (ibid., 5). This is an operation of Black techno-conjuring. Dixon-Román describes this Black technoconjuring of indecision that cannot be calculated by machine systems. He uses the example of deepfakes made with Generative Adversial Networks, which have blurred dots or mismatched accessories that he interprets as diffractive wave patterns in Karen Barad's sense, that is, patterns of overlap that "make a difference because they produce differences" (ibid.). He sees the double face of haunting in these patterns: the exhumation of colonized bodies "in the violent wake of the algorithm" (ibid.) and the potential to change the logic of the systems.

The magic of haunting, as described by Dixon-Román using the example of algorithms, cannot be easily translated to memes, even though algorithms play a role in their dissemination. Nonetheless, with recourse to the "You Get a Car" meme, I would like to suggest that it too has an inherent magic that operates not only as a revenant of colonial-racist pasts, but also as a way of opening up the possibility of reparation or undoing violence. With regard to the aforementioned GIF version, it is striking to what extent the loop produces the animation described above while at the same time restricting the radius of movement. On the other hand, however, a movement is created that not only insinuates a dance movement in the up and down or back and forth triggered by looping, but also creates a certain blurriness, a slight dizziness. I understand this dizziness in the sense of the specter's two-facedness and as a force of the uncanny, which, according to Samira Kawash, can be described as decolonial because it can neither be directed teleologically towards certain goals of liberation, nor can it be traced in social reality (Kawash 1999, 239). Rather, this force takes place in the technological asignification of Black conjuring. I understand the decolonial power of this Black conjuring, which I would like to propose as an uncanny deception of blurring movements, as exemplary of the ambiguity of the ghostly nature of memes. It articulates itself as an unsettling sense.

The materiality of the sensuality of this deception could also be linked to Armond R. Towns's concept of Black radicalism, derived from the zombie. In *On Black Media Philosophy*, Towns initially refers to Jussi Parikka's concept of zombie media, which, in the form of residues, electronic waste, and toxic chemicals, lead an afterlife and transform our world (Towns 2022, 151). Towns questions this media history or archaeology, which is always portrayed as raceless, by referring to the Black history of the zombie, which is not only a product of

popular *white* imagination, but also of Black emancipation history in Haiti (ibid., 152). The idea of dying in the struggle for liberation, yet not being able to leave the plantations, but having to continue living as the undead according to the wishes of the *white* people, organized Black radicalism in Haiti, just as Black radicalism structured the fear of *white* people.

According to Towns, it is not the zombie as a metaphor that shapes fear, but rather the zombie as a material embodiment of the Black struggle. In contrast to Parikka's concept of the zombie, the materiality of this radicalism does not refer to the apocalyptic end of the world (Parikka 2012), but rather the affirmation of ambiguity. In Black radicalism, materiality is closely related to unpredictability. Or to put it another way: ambiguity is Black worldmaking (Towns 2022, 153). The GIF can also be understood in terms of world creation, in which materiality means ambiguity rather than objectivity. The dance created by editing and looping keeps the swaying of the meme as a zombie open in the sense of what Tavia Nyong'o understands as the delay of becoming an object in his examination of the public reenactment of Michael Jackson's zombie walk during the Occupy protests in London (Nyong'o 2012, 144).

In this delay—I would call it memetic ambiguity—Black worldmaking occurs, again following Towns. So even though the "You Get a Car" meme perpetuates the cycle of accumulation through the dehumanization-related dispossession of Black femininity, the swaying, dizzying zombie dance of the animated meme also enacts an incalculable form of Black worldmaking. This is an expression of Black radicalism, a right to reparations, as Towns explains in reference to Fred Moten and Stefano Harney (2013), which is located in the discovery of an alternative epistemology of meme technologies (Towns 2022, 155).

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