

Blackface from Time to Time

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Trigger warning, anyone? Blackface performance has always been both offensive and indelible. Why does it endure if it is so objectionable? It still surrounds us in many different forms, types of entertainment, and horizons of expectation. Racial “drag” in the form of white performers in blackface seems to exist in some kind of eternal present. Instances of its performance go back centuries (carnival, “primitive rebels,” Shakespeare’s *Othello*); come into commercial popularity in the US in the 1820s and 1830s; dominate popular entertainment on stage in the form of the “minstrel show” all across the nineteenth century; then migrate to Hollywood film as well as the music industry in the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. And it is a global phenomenon, extending from Great Britain to South Africa, Japan to Australia. The official censoring of blackface in the 1960s and after, which gave it a new but not altogether straightforward political complexion, coincided with its continual “vernacular” reappearance in Halloween costumes and Rotary Club functions and fraternity parties and college yearbooks to this day, where from time to time blackface makes its inevitable return. Then there are the recent cases of white North American activists, scholars, and writers passing for Other (Rachel Doležal, Jessica Krug, Andrea Smith, Sam Forster’s *Seven Shoulders*) that only thicken the plot. I want to address the time-to-time temporality of blackface’s ongoing present and the question of why US-American culture—my focus here—seems to require the racial, sexual, and gendered interventions of its eternal returns.

I mean “time-to-time” in two senses or registers. The first is occasional, as in, every now and then, or, there it is again—which is true to the lived reality of racial drag’s sudden flare-ups, its inevitable reoccurrences in day-to-day life. No one is particularly shocked anymore when a skeleton shows up in some celebrity’s or politician’s closet or an ill-advised costume happens in the public eye. The other sense of time-to-time is allusive—the circuitry or shuttling from our time to *back then* (nineteenth-century minstrel shows, say), current blackface practice gesturing to more relaxed racist old-time performance ways, which measures an arc that is more like a jagged or even recursive line: the costume recalling other times or out-of-time costumes, or perhaps only

willfully recalling times when it was still ok to do blackface! So time after time times two, one logic animating the other; as Ian Baucom (2005) remarks in *Specters of the Atlantic*, time piles up, accumulates, thickens rather than merely passing in progressive or linear fashion with the past bested and out of sight. If blackface or any racial drag is ongoing, it always carries other times in it, unsettling time, implying a temporality of race and a racing of time, a kind of mixing of historical signals.

In another context Jacques Derrida (1994) has termed this phenomenon “hauntologie”—say it in French—ontology haunted by a pun on haunting, “being” being no simple thing but rather an unsettled, out of joint, noncontemporaneous affair, prey to repetition and ghosted past acts (the past is not even past, per William Faulkner [1951]), the repressed that returns to consort uneasily with the present, no matter how conscious or informed we might be. What does it mean to be haunted by blackface, by racial drag?

The chief domains of this returning repressed are Hollywood, the pop music industry, Halloween rituals, the public political realm, and the odd inverse passing cases I will note later; they are reliable hosts of blackface reiteration and repetition in the time-to-time temporality of racial drag’s eternal return. I say repetition because these instances are, as I say, often citational: a tacit historical resurrection, a remembering the time of minstrelsy’s classic form. Anyone who puts on the blackface guise—see Al Jolson in *The Jazz Singer* (1927) or Bing Crosby in *Holiday Inn* (1942)—mimics or updates the canonical costume of black face paint, exaggerated lips, woolly hair, and shabby (or, conversely, overly elegant) clothes. These accoutrements enable the brutal caricature of African Americans for sport, so central to the hugely popular nineteenth-century commercial minstrel show. Very often, even if in updated form, there are vestiges of the North/South split on offer in the enduring stereotypes of carefree Southern rustic slave Jim Crow and buffoonish northern urban dandy Zip Coon (when Ted Danson roasted his then-girlfriend Whoopi Goldberg in blackface at the Friar’s Club in 1993, he was outfitted as a Zip Coon dandy). Despite Spike Lee’s *Bamboozled* (2000), the definitive takedown of the form, key elements continue to punctuate such examples—the watermelon in Katy Perry’s pretend-Black *This Is How We Do* (2014), dance appropriations like Miley Cyrus twerking at the 2013 Video Music Awards (complete with Black backup dancers), and speech mimicry such as Meghan Trainor’s “blaccent” and the song *All About That Bass* (2014). But mostly this kind of appropriation, mixing, transubstantiation, whatever you’d like to call it, happens without the mask, so it’s more generalized, tricky, and submerged if unmistakably there once again.

To borrow from Elizabeth Freeman’s study *Time Binds*, such recent performances are characterized by what Freeman calls “temporal drag” (Freeman 2010, 62), a sort of undertow or throwback quality that at the least qualifies

the novelty of these new works.¹ This is a second order of drag to add to the idea of racial and ethnic drag, and, again, introduces the way in which linear or progressive time is unsettled or disordered by it as well as suggesting that we ought to consider race and racism's temporal dimension—complementary to what Freeman does with drag and queerness—alongside the rather more familiar and frankly easier critiques of cultural appropriation. The tug of the anterior is stubborn. As Stuart Hall (1988) has remarked, race and racism, while always operative, are not everywhere and always *the same*; there are conjunctural and contextual, and I would add temporal, pressures that affect their deployment, in performance or in social relations generally. That is why in addition to being citational, instances of blackface in the ongoing present are marked by their occasion: instances both congeal and create a buzz that speaks to the racial regime of their moment. When on Halloween 2013 *Dancing with the Stars* dancer Julianne Hough put on blackface to mimic “Crazy Eyes” Warren, the mentally unstable inmate played by Uzo Aduba in the show *Orange Is the New Black*, a controversy erupted regarding Hough's offensive choice of party gear, followed by the usual rites of apology and face-saving public self-abasement. In addition to its unconsciously summoning the racial-carceral regime currently contested by proponents of abolition of the prison-industrial complex, the costume's swift denunciation indicated a relatively new widespread intolerance of blackface. As a 2017 *Daily Show with Trevor Noah*² segment featuring comedian Roy Wood, Jr. had it, “Race Is Not a Costume” (see it on YouTube): the bit made it witheringly clear that blackface on Halloween is never a good idea.

Yet at the same time, as I have discussed elsewhere, there came a resurgence of *ironic* blackface deployments after the election of Barack Obama, one of them by Obama himself.³ This development, in my view, complicates the

1 See also a number of the essays in the splendid collection by Colbert et al. 2020 as well as Lloyd 2019, 70—72.

2 www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Kl1cnGoQmY, accessed November 2, 2024.

3 I draw here on my analysis initially presented in my *Black Mirror: The Cultural Contradictions of American Racism* (2017), Chapter 1. There were other examples just before Obama's ascendancy, among them the variously raced characters played by Tracey Ullman in her Showtime mockumentary “State of the Union” (including a West Indian airport security guard called Chanel Monticello) and the revolting Shirley Q. Liquor stand-up act by comedian Chuck Knipp. Joshua Alston, “The Dark Side of “Corking Up,”” *Newsweek* (March 14, 2008); Neely Tucker, “Hollywood's About-Face on Blackface,” *Washington Post* (March 16, 2008), M8. I have profited very much from the renewed attention to this tradition to be found in Nicholas Sammond's excellent *Birth of an Industry: Blackface Minstrelsy and the Rise of American Animation* (2015); also useful (by analogy) is Katrin Sieg's *Ethnic Drag: Performing Race, Nation, Sexuality in West Germany* (2009).

conjunctural and temporal drag of blackface's eternal return in the years before 2016. The general notion seemed to be that in our enlightened "postracial" age—a temporally tendentious assessment, one that has quickly dissipated—it was OK to play around with blackface, make fun of the very idea by *putting on the mask*. We were beyond all that now, and the best way to show it was to do it all over again! The election of the first African American president of the United States occasioned the apparently legitimate return of blackface comedy. The burnt cork snuck back, most notably in comedian Fred Armisen's many Obama impressions on television's *Saturday Night Live*. Armisen had already ventured his version of pop star Prince; his blackface (and "blindface") New York governor David Paterson was a big hit. Before you knew it, *Mad Men*'s Jon Hamm was cooing opposite a protesting Tracy Morgan in a spoof of *Amos 'n' Andy* on TV's *30 Rock*, Fox NFL *Sunday*'s Frank Caliendo blacked up for a broadcast as basketball star Charles Barkley, Billy Crystal resurrected his blackface Sammy Davis Jr. for the opening segment of the 2012 Academy Awards telecast, and the gang on *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* pursued more than one greasepaint remake of *Lethal Weapon*. Even Robert Downey Jr. got into the act, however ironically, using blackface to lampoon a white Method actor playing a hard-bitten Black GI in the Ben Stiller lark *Tropic Thunder* (2008). The kitchen heating up, SNL replaced Armisen's Obama during election season with that of African American Jay Pharoah, whose artificially lightened skin on top of the inevitable comparisons to his comedic predecessor only redoubled the minstrel quotient. Earlier in the decade, Dennis Haysbert had laid important representational track for Obama's advancement in his portrayal of Black president David Palmer on Fox's *24*, a more solemn version of comedian Chris Rock's conceit in the 2003 film *Head of State*. With Obama's actual triumph came the conscious restoration of what they used to call "negro minstrelsy," this time in a mode meant to mock the form but by definition stuck within its contours.

These contradictions descend from the nineteenth-century ones I tried to document in my study *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, but public censure alongside self-consciously ironic uses of blackface, with a Black man in the White House, is obviously a whole new representational conjuncture. Consider the temporal drag afoot in two purposeful blackface displays in the teens. One of these was the mock movie (still on YouTube) produced for President Obama's April 2013 appearance at the yearly White House Correspondents' Dinner. The spoof opens with a deadpan Steven Spielberg recalling how it hit him to follow up his award-winning biopic of Lincoln with—Steven Spielberg's *Obama*. But who on earth to play him? "As it turns out," the director says, "the answer was right in front of me all along: Daniel Day-Lewis!" The actor so brilliant as Hawkeye in *Last of the Mohicans*, as Bill the Butcher in *Gangs of New York*, and most recently as Spielberg's Abraham

Lincoln, a quick montage of clips certifies, “becomes his characters.” “And you know what?” crows Spielberg, “He *nailed* it.” Cut to Barack Obama being interviewed with the large caption, “DANIEL DAY-LEWIS, Method Actor.” The joke has arrived. “Was it hard playing Obama? I’ll be honest, yeah it was,” says Obama as Day-Lewis as Obama. Shots of Obama in the mirror practicing “his accent”: “Hello Ohio! Hello Ohio! I love you back!” For one thing, the actor avers, “the cosmetics were challenging”—and almost 200 years of blacking-up roll into the picture. After a quick, almost obligatory bit with Tracy Morgan talking about his performance as (who else?) Joe Biden, we’re back to “Day-Lewis.” “The hardest part? Trying to understand his motivations ... What makes him tick? Why doesn’t he get mad? If I were him [sic] I’d be mad *all the time*. But I’m not him. I’m Daniel Day-Lewis.” Fade to black on “Obama” doing his hair and checking his hand gestures in the mirror. Subverting the color line by taking the White House, Obama attempts to subvert it doubly by making fun of racist blackface. This is far more playful and sanctioned than, say, the 2019 discovery of then-Governor of Virginia Ralph Northam’s college yearbook with a picture of Northam in blackface standing next to someone in a Ku Klux Klan outfit, which produced public outcry and calls for him to resign (he managed to survive the incident politically). Obama as Day-Lewis as Obama seems delighted to exploit the joke that an actor in blackface could play him best. One wonders, however, whether the implication that there’s a white man inside him kills the joy a little.⁴

A very different set of ironies attended a second instance from the teens. In 2015, Baltimore ex-cop Bobby “Al Jolson” Berger, who for decades performed as Al Jolson in blackface at local venues, which created tension within the police department and with other civil authorities and which likely cost him his job, offered to resurrect his Jolson act. The occasion was a fundraiser for the police officers charged in the death of Freddie Gray, a Black suspect who was thrown unsecured into the back of a police van and driven around intentionally roughly, leading to injuries that killed him. Cue Bobby Berger, who wanted to help raise funds for the cop perpetrators with a blackface act that reiterated the violence, a sort of exorcism of racist policing through representational legitimation. The fundraiser was canceled after public alarm—the officers themselves refused to accept any funds raised, and the venue disavowed the performance—though Berger remained unrepentant, claiming there was nothing racist about his act.⁵ Here again the strange coexistence of knowing distanciation, outright endorsement, and public censure of racial drag, all of it underscored by a steady

4 See Roediger 2010; Sugrue 2010; Lipsitz 2011; Touré 2011; Jeffries 2013; Keller 2015; Dyson 2016.

5 See Contrera 2015.

drumbeat of police violence that by 2020 would lead to the Black Lives Matter movement and marches.

Just another moment, that is to say, in the time-to-time temporality of time immemorial. While the nineteenth-century minstrel show was organized around the quite explicit “borrowing” of African American cultural materials for white dissemination, a borrowing that depended on the material relations of slavery, such performance obscured these relations by pretending that slavery and racial oppression was amusing, right, and natural. This is still blackface’s primary and primordial urgency, transposed in the present day to racial dominance more generally. Like minstrelsy of yore, blackface in the ongoing present is also a space for playing with or making theater out of white guilt, fear, desire, and other affects devoted to Black people, Black culture, and the political relations that govern discourse between the races. For all its ridicule, blackface in my view sublimates a secret envy of, even erotic desire for, “Blackness.” The blackface mechanism of cultural control over “Blackness” and Black cultural forms has had a sadly lasting legacy, but it has also, perversely, provided a channel for the Black cultural “contamination” of and influence on the dominant culture. The dynamic I have called “love and theft” names the dialectic of white racial attraction and aversion, cultural appropriation born of cross-racial desire, that first arose commercially in the minstrel show but is plain today wherever you look (the NBA, boxing, the NFL). Only by beginning to inventory the racial deposits the minstrel show has paid forward can we hope to acknowledge the racial impulses, reckonings, and unconscious reactions that lie so deep as to feel inevitable and given.

That said, racial drag pivots less on appropriation or impersonation than on the “theatricalization” of race itself, the production of a kind of fantasy zone amenable to racial phantasmagoria. Not unlike cross-gender drag, Black mirroring results less in the reproduction of “Blackness” than an activation of it for white purposes, which always redound to social dominance and self-regard. What artist Kara Walker once called in a series of screen prints the *Emancipation Approximation* is that asymptotic vector of misrecognition and fetishism, a pure playing in the dark, whereby classic American literature, Hollywood film, pop musical artistry, concerned social commentary, and the performative commons of everyday life summon “Blackness” in acts, often unwitting, of supremacist redundancy.

Fifty years ago, Richard Slotkin (1973) published the classic volume *Regeneration Through Violence*, a study of the ways continuous settler extermination of indigenous peoples on the so-called frontier functioned continually to renew settler life. What I’m describing in the eternal return of blackface drag is

something akin to *regeneration through ignorance*, the privilege of unknowing.⁶ There seems a persistent desire on the part of whites in everyday blackface to forget or remain innocent of and clueless about racial dominance and indeed violence, including the violence of the mask itself; the mask, that vehicle of amnesia, is a brand (in many senses), a title of ownership to the “Blackness” it affixes in black skin, a threat, a mark of terror. How striking it is when a blackface perp cries out, once busted, “I didn’t know it was offensive!” or “I didn’t mean it racially!” This willed refusal to acknowledge one’s power, or, what is the same thing, the privilege of remaining unaware of it, amounts to that blissed mix of stupidity and sublimity that Sianne Ngai terms “stuplimity” (2005).⁷ Bathed in ignorance, reveling in regression, happily exposing repressed or unconscious matters they know not of, racial and ethnic drag kings and queens produce racial dominance in its most leisurely, casual, chill, and fun registers, an idiot’s sublime. It is the consummate exhibit of blackface’s offensiveness as forgotten but not gone.⁸

Which makes the white liberal attempts to make use of it across the last century so oddly compelling. Behind it all, whether in the projections of intellectuals or the entanglements among outsiders, is the white fascination with an imagined “Blackness” that Norman Mailer was in 1957 to call “The White Negro” (Mailer 1957): Harlem Renaissance broker Carl Van Vechten, jazzmen Mezz Mezzrow and Johnny Otis, Elvis, rapper Eminem. As Leslie Fiedler once trenchantly remarked, “born theoretically white, we are permitted to pass our childhood as imaginary Indians, our adolescence as imaginary Negroes, and only then are expected to settle down to being what we really are: white once more” (Fiedler 1972, 134). By the turn of the 1960s, this structure of feeling could be seen as a kind of cross-racial solidarity, and with John Howard Griffin’s 1961 *Black Like Me* (remarkably still in print) the gesture was enshrined. Griffin famously went through various skin-altering treatments to go undercover for a six-week tour of the South to discern the answer to the question, as the cover of several paperback editions puts it, “What was it like, really like, to be a Black in the Deep South?”—intimating among other things that a host of Black authors addressing precisely this had failed the task. The book’s longevity suggests how forceful a hold this putatively sympathetic crossing has had on the US imagination. *Black Like Me* took the available materials of white cross-racial interest and used them to new ends; it is the crucial historical switchpoint between a racist history of cooning and a new politics of antiracism. And while

6 See Sedgwick 1993, 23–51.

7 Ngai (2005, Chapter 6) uses the notion somewhat differently than my meaning here, though performative repetition is key to her concept.

8 See the keen insight of Joseph Roach in his *Cities of the Dead* (1996).

the cooning still hasn't gone away, the book instantiated an enduring civil rights template (updated in the form of today's white "ally" figure, one might argue) that captured the interest of (among many others) writer Grace Halsell, who a few years later did a mimic version of Griffin's stunt, published as *Soul Sister* in 1969. (The infinite regress of mimicry, a hauntological house of mirrors, comes with the territory: besting Halsell, Robert Bonazzi who wrote a 1997 study of John Howard Griffin called *Man in the Mirror* and married Griffin's widow.) While meant as sympathetic gestures of solidarity, these texts are complicitous with the racial designs they set out to expose.⁹

More than a little of this dynamic appears to be at work in the case of Rachel Doležal, the putatively Black president of the Spokane NAACP who in 2015 was revealed to be a white woman passing for Black, causing an international scandal. If whiteness performed in full ideological rectitude depends upon the renunciation of enjoyment, the body, and an aptitude for pleasure, with the Other seen as especially gifted in this line (with regard especially to food, music, bodily exhibition, and sexual appetite), Doležal's upbringing was by her account quite forcibly renunciatory. Her severely strict rearing by fundamentalist Christian parents put her in search of something better, which she found first in her adoptive Black siblings and then Black college friends and mentors, and later her (now ex-) husband; she went on to enroll in an MFA program at historically Black Howard University. Organizing her enjoyment and self-definition through the Other whose identity she herself assumed, Doležal not only accessed a new relation to the world but took it upon herself to push for African American civil rights, ultimately as head of the Spokane chapter of the NAACP, in all respects apparently earnest in the effort of demarcating her universe, disavowing with fervor her appropriation even while enacting it. This is rather precisely the mixed erotic economy of American whiteness, here turned to the account of a strange antiracist alchemy.¹⁰

This structure has no doubt meant that the dispossessed become bearers of the dominant classes' "folk" culture, their repository of joy and moral passion and general revivification; yet one of the less recognized shapes of that revivifying has come in instances of white identification with Black oppression. Whether it precedes or follows a dominative logic of pleasure, an identificatory white antiracism in blackface guise is in fact its twin. This perhaps explains Doležal's expressed feeling of being home at last upon racially crossing over, and her embrace of the rearranged kinship structure by which she has more or less adopted two of her parents' four adopted Black children as her own. According

9 See Gaines 2017, *passim*. My analysis of both Griffin and Doležal outlined in this text draws on Chapter 5 of my book *Black Mirror* (2017).

10 See Doležal 2017, Chapters 1–15; Sunderland 2015; Oluo 2017; Žižek 1990, 57.

to Doležal, interestingly enough, it all began with Black hair: braiding her Black sister's hair, then having hers done in various Black-styled braids and weaves, she pursued her inner "Blackness" through the pleasures of bodily expression. Much has been made of Doležal's having sued Howard while a student there for discriminating against her whiteness, which makes her turn to Black seem all the more opportunistic. To my mind, there is hardly any contradiction here: both moves are underwritten by white privilege, both seek recognition from her chosen people.¹¹

Doležal's position on her adopted Blackness rather amusingly aligns with Walter Benn Michaels's (1997) arguments about the incoherence of racial identity, something that racial drag unwittingly illuminates. Michaels has long scored social-constructionist arguments for being tacitly biologicistic; passing is logically impossible, according to Michaels, because you can't "secretly" be your former race once you pass if race is in fact a social construction: you just are your new racial definition, with no blood residue about it. Michaels would logically have to consider Doležal to be as Black as she regards herself. She is now known as Nkechi Amare Diallo. It is indeed essentialist to remind her she's white—which is why antiessentialism isn't really the point. Doležal and Michaels both disregard the desperately uneven historical pressures, the burdens and opportunities inequitably distributed to white and Black, in the formation of racial regimes, no matter how "false" the category of race may be; these pressures cannot be readily circumvented either by breezily casting off whiteness or by newly shouldering Blackness, nor can they be reduced to tidy syllogisms à la Michaels. True, Doležal crossed over not for fame or money but for inner peace as well as social justice and race leadership; in this, she suggests she is trans not unlike Caitlyn Jenner (though Doležal doesn't push the analogy); and such commentators as Melissa Harris-Perry (on MSNBC), Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (in *The New York Times*), and scholar of passing Allyson Hobbs (2014) (ditto) came variously to her defense. Doležal does ironically encapsulate in one body a long NAACP history of white patrons/allies and Black race leaders. But this performance of identity is not so easily decoupled from the legacy of blackface. In assuming the privilege to speak for and as a Black woman, she is nothing if not, at least in part, white once more.¹²

Other recent visible examples of such inverse passing follow a brassier logic than this model of care mixed with guilt. In September 2020, Jessica Krug, a professor of African and African American studies at George Washington University who had passed for years as one or another variant of Algerian/

11 See Doležal 2017, Chapters 10, 13, 15; Wilson 1994, 11—17, 47—55; Mercer 1994, 97—128.

12 See Doležal 2017, 246, 232f., 244.

Caribbean/East Harlem/Bronx Afro-Latina, confessed her own “napalm toxic soil of lies” in an essay on *Medium*: she grew up white and Jewish in suburban Kansas City. Describing her ploy as “the very epitome of violence,” Krug was within days forced to resign from her job. For as long as it worked, Krug leaned into the persona, calling herself “Jess La Bombalera,” using a cringy “barrio” accent, and testifying angrily and profanely before the New York City Council about East Harlem gentrifiers. Krug’s insistent insiderism made references to “we” and “us” with friends and acquaintances of color and badgered light-skinned Black friends about their Blackness. Testimony since her self-outing suggests that people around her not infrequently suspected something fishy. Krug certainly outdid Griffin and Halsell in presumptuousness, her uber-Boricua osadía seeming to rather overdo it. What is striking is Krug’s autocritique, which is useful in its severity (and seems to spring from the same source as her appropriative self-righteousness). Krug’s story by her own admission amplifies the white entitlement, recursive repetition, and citational force in all racial drag.¹³

Indeed we might call on her analysis to take a closing look at the latest (but surely not last) entry in these annals. The author is quite aware of the history I have outlined but chooses to repeat it. As if to square racial drag’s circle—confirming its eternal returns, producing to boot a time-to-time sense of temporal drag, a second- or even third-order mimicry—comes now Sam Forster’s *Seven Shoulders* (2024). The author is a white Canadian journalist (not from the US and therefore *reliable* is the implication) bent on self-consciously redoing Griffin’s *Black Like Me* or Halsell’s *Soul Sister*, which Forster glosses in the first section of the book.¹⁴ Placing himself in the line of these and other undercover racial travelogues, Forster hitchhikes as white on one day and then as Black on the next (Maybelline Mocha his makeup of choice) on seven different city roadside shoulders; he receives seven offers as a white hitcher and only one as a Black hitcher. Thus proving what hardly needed proof, the gambit has been roundly ridiculed. Touted on Amazon as “the most important book on American race relations that has ever been written,” *Seven Shoulders* was defended against early haters on X by Forster himself in the most fulsome terms. This is

13 See Krug 2020; Flaherty 2020; Jackson 2020; Ziyad 2020; Daniels 2021, Chapter 4. A figure adjacent to Krug in the pop world is Ariana Grande, an Italian-American pop star who is often taken as some variety of Latina (with the help of certain racially ambiguous gestures by the performer herself, though she doesn’t technically seek to pass); a good study of Grande’s “off-whiteness” is Guterl 2023.

14 Alisha Gaines’s article “The Strange History of Journalistic Blackface” (2024) conveys the findings of her book *Black for a Day* (2017) and offers the appropriate rebuttal to Forster’s stunt and claims.

a masculinist right-wing departure in these already murky swamps, fitting for a moment that includes “hillbilly elegist” and Vice President J. D. Vance (2016).¹⁵

Hauntology rules Forster’s world. “Griffin is possibly the most interesting son America bore in the twentieth century” (3), Forster implausibly suggests, overestimating the force and interest of Griffin’s stunt: “Griffin was a mammoth. There are few people who had a greater impact on American race relations throughout the course of the Civil Rights movement, and fewer still who were White” (9). And so Forster determines as it were to take up Griffin’s offer, producing a recursive temporality that is profoundly out of joint and yet in step with our times. Forster doesn’t read the room. Sensing rightly that he would have a tough time finding a publisher for a twenty-first century Griffin, Forster launches his own publishing company, Slaughterhouse Media—first entry his own *Seven Shoulders*. “In addition to constituting a tremendous literary achievement, I believe that this book constitutes a tremendous achievement in the realm of civic progress” (16), he writes, and as Michael Jackson quipped to Paul McCartney in “The Girl Is Mine,” you keep dreamin’. As with Krug, racial self-aggrandizement is key: it takes Forster to do this work, he claims with near-Trumpian temerity, because Blacks have “never been anything but Black” and so “have no experiential barometer with respect to race ... My barometer [wait for it] is better than anyone else’s” (17). Yet the “taxonomy” of the book’s subtitle is hopelessly muddled, its division between “institutional racism” (basically eradicated, it is here claimed) and “interpersonal racism” (still in effect, says the author), is no division at all, to say nothing of the incorrect judgments here; as the author himself admits, one by definition bleeds into the other (151). As for the decision to make hitchhiking the litmus for racial dominance in America, it is hard to know where to begin. Snap judgments at high rates of speed, the mix of motives for picking up *anybody* hitching, all kinds of circumstantial variables, the racial and gender and sexual quiddities in the decision to pull over or not (paternalist racialism, fear of rape, sexual calculation—Forster assumes that one driver stops because he “wanted to fuck me” [89]), and so on (68): not a problem here. Forster makes a case for the free, voluntarist, and therefore lab-certified nature of the privatized mobile theater that is the automobile.

Haunted by precursors of every stripe, as he knows, Forster is weirdly breezy about his undertaking. Pondering the thorny question of whether his excursion “counts” as blackface, he decides, well, that it doesn’t—it’s *journalistic* blackface, somehow different in kind (76). Forster has fits of defensiveness like this throughout the book; in a volume whose tone is never quite under control,

15 Ron Howard’s film based on the book, same title, premiered in 2020.

these bursts still come quite unexpectedly. Given the context, they seem racially overdetermined, and definitely New Model Army brutal. Dismissing potential critics of his undertaking, he takes up startlingly violent rhetorical arms in the defense of friends and family: “But if you use this book as a pretense to attack my friends or family, if you threaten them or go at them in any way, I will do everything in my power to ruin you. I will make destroying you my rabid obsession, and I won’t stop until you’re either dead or so fucked up that you wish you were” (18). Noted, Sam!

Sam Forster manages to expose how indefensible and yet irresistible is the impulse behind time-to-time blackface performances. His work is valuable in letting us see the wheels behind the impulse turn. The mix of amnesia with recall, blindness and unwitting insight, brutality with solidarity, trepidation and willfulness. Blackface blithely not a problem and very much a problem. A fitting stop in the saga of racial drag that is sure to go on. See you around the next bend.

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