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## 'The show is not about race': Custom, Screen Culture, and The Black and White Minstrel Show --Manuscript Draft--

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Abstract:	<p>In 1967, when the BBC was faced with a petition by the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination (CARD) requesting an end to the televised variety programme, The Black and White Minstrel Show (1958-1978), producers at the BBC, the press, and audience members collectively argued that the historic presence of minstrelsy in Britain rendered the practice of blacking up harmless. This article uses Critical Race Theory as a useful framework for unpacking defences that hinged both on the colour-blindness of white British audiences, and the simultaneous existence of wider customs of blacking up within British television and film. I examine a range of 'screen culture' from the 1920s to the 1970s, including feature films, home movies, newsreels, and television, that provide evidence of the existence of blackface as a type of racialised custom in British entertainment throughout this period. Efforts by organisations such as CARD, black-press publications like Flamingo, and audiences of colour, to name blacking up and minstrelsy as racist in the late 1960s were met by fierce resistance from majority white audiences and producers, who denied their authority to do so. Concepts of colour-blindness or 'racial innocence' thus become a useful means of examining, first, the wide-ranging existence of blacking up practices within British screen culture; second, a broad reluctance by producers and the majority of audiences to identify this as racist; and third, the exceptional role that race played in characterizations of white audiences, that were otherwise seen as historically fragile and impressionable in the face of screen content.</p>

Figure 2





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‘The show is not about race’:

Custom, Screen Culture, and *The Black and White Minstrel Show*

*As many of the signatories are no doubt new to this country they will perhaps not be aware that black-faced minstrels performing a song and dance act have been a traditional form of entertainment in the British Isles for a great many years.*

Kenneth Lamb (Director of Public Affairs, BBC)  
to David Pitt (Campaign Against Racial  
Discrimination) 1967, ITA Archive

On May 19<sup>th</sup> 1967, Kenneth Lamb, director of Public Affairs at the BBC, wrote to David Pitt, the chairman of the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination (CARD), in response to CARD’s petition calling for an end to the BBC’s televised variety show, *The Black and White Minstrel Show*.<sup>1</sup> By 1967, *The Black and White Minstrel Show* (BWMS), which featured white actors in blackface performing musical dance numbers, often on a set styled to suggest the Southern United States, had already been broadcast for nine years and its popularity with British television viewers was well established. The BWMS would continue to be broadcast by the BBC into British homes until 1978, an astonishing 20-year span. The petition, signed by 200 people, provoked an immediate response from Lamb, who was both enjoying a hit programme and functioning within a large organisation accustomed to ongoing scrutiny by government, the press, and the public of its fulfilment of its charter to ‘inform, educate, and entertain’ British audiences.<sup>2</sup> In line with the BBC’s ongoing practice of responding to the complaints of individual viewers and various groups, Lamb replied in a

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Lamb, BBC to David Pitt, CARD, 19 May 1967, File 3995803/ITA Archive.

<sup>2</sup> James Curran and Jean Seaton, *Power without Responsibility: Press, Broadcasting, and the Internet in Britain* 7th Edition (London, 2010).

manner that situated Pitt, a man Lamb either assumed or knew to be black, as ‘new to this country.’<sup>3</sup> Lamb lectured Pitt and CARD members on the appropriate perspective one should bring to viewing the *BWMS*, emphasizing that minstrelsy was a ‘traditional form of entertainment in the British Isles’ with a long history that immigrants would likely ‘not be aware’ of. While arguing that the practice of minstrelsy was both historic and not inherently racist, Lamb implied that this was something native, white, British viewers already understood.

Lamb was confident that his response reflected broader attitudes towards the programme amongst British audiences. In the thin file on the *BWMS* available at the BBC Written Archives, a consensus in defense of the *BWMS* is evident across both of Britain’s broadcasting institutions. On the same day that Lamb wrote to CARD, Stephen Murphy, Senior Programme Officer at the Independent Television Authority (ITA), privately wrote in support of the BBC’s rebuff of CARD’s complaints to someone he thought could influence the situation further: EJB Rose, Director of the Survey of Race Relations, itself affiliated with the National Committee for Commonwealth Immigrants (NCCI). To Rose, Murphy jokingly acknowledged, ‘I should make it clear that I have no personal interest in this: *The Black & White Minstrel Show* is a BBC programme, and an unhealthily successful one at that!’ Still, Murphy argued, “I doubt if anyone takes stereotypes seriously anyways, but if they do, then the Black and White Minstrel stereotype is rather a helpful one—warm, friendly, affectionate and gay.’ He went on to state, ‘Blackening up is a theatrical convention so old that it has lost any derogatory meaning. All that this group of CARD members is doing—though I understand the petition has the official backing of CARD—is to create a racial issue where none exists.’<sup>4</sup> Murphy ended with a nod to Rose’s influence with the NCCI: ‘I doubt if this campaign will ever get off the ground: but if it does, then I hope that the NCCI will dissociate itself from it.’ This letter to the NCCI acted as another attempt to

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<sup>3</sup> Pitt was indeed a black man, born in Grenada, who undertook a degree in medicine at the University of Edinburgh in 1933 before moving to Trinidad and then returning to England after World War II to establish a medical practice; See Kennetta Hammond Perry, *London is the Place for Me: Black Britons, Citizenship and the Politics of Race* (Oxford, 2015): 216-217.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Murphy (Senior Programme Officer, ITA) to E.J.B. Esq. (Director, Survey of National Committee for Commonwealth Immigrants) 19 May 1967, R78/1, 921/1, ‘Black & White Minstrel Show’ BBC Written Archives Centre (WAC).

educate immigrants, through organizations that represented them, on the appropriate response to the *BWMS*.

Murphy and Lamb's invocation of minstrelsy as simultaneously historic and not a 'racial issue' mobilized what I will demonstrate was a widespread justification for the presence of blackface within popular film and television in postwar Britain, rooted in conceptions of a colour-blind white British audience. In 1962, five years prior to the controversy of May 1967, Kenneth Adam, then Director of Television at the BBC, described minstrelsy as 'a perfectly honourable and uncondescending convention' in a booklet about the *BWMS* for the programme's fans.<sup>5</sup> When *Flamingo*, a monthly magazine aimed at West Indians and Africans living in Britain, ran a piece criticizing the *BWMS* in September 1961, the next two issues featured some of the letters that, according to its editors Edward Scobie and Ellis Komey, 'came pouring in' to *Flamingo's* offices.<sup>6</sup> The editors noted that, 'Many [of these letters] were from white readers who thought Negroes "too touchy".'<sup>7</sup> One reader, P. Okuri from Birmingham, recounted the reaction of white people in his office when he showed them *Flamingo's* story: 'they could not understand why we should feel so badly about the programme. They kept telling me it was good fun and full of entertainment.'<sup>8</sup>

Minstrelsy and blacking up was, from this perspective, an established custom within British entertainment that was not seen as racist by its white British producers or its majority white audience. This racialised custom, however, has largely been overlooked by scholars examining the relationship between immigration, race, and screen culture in postwar Britain. Attention has instead focused on the so-called 'social-problem' films of the late 1950s and early 1960s by Basil Dearden and Roy Ward Baker, while Sarita Malik, Darrell M. Netwon, and Stephen Bourne have examined the self-conscious effort by television broadcasters at both the BBC and ITV in the 1960s and 1970s to address immigration and growing racial

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<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Adam, 'Foreword' *The Black and White Minstrels* (London: BBC, 1962), quoted in Gavin Schaffer, *Vision of a Nation: The Making of Multiculturalism on British Television, 1960-1980* (London, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> 'Bad Taste B.B.C.' *Flamingo* (Sept 1961): 22-24. 'Those Minstrels,' Dear *Flamingo*. *Flamingo* (October 1961): 2.

<sup>7</sup> 'Those Minstrels,' *Flamingo* (October 1961): 2.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*



tension in Britain through programming.<sup>9</sup> In 1965, two ‘Conferences on Immigrants’ were held between BBC officials and black and Asian representatives and it was in this period that black and Asian actors began to appear on British screens with some, albeit scarce, regularity.<sup>10</sup> Much work has also been done on the ‘racial sitcoms,’ such as BBC’s *Till Death Us Do Part* (1965-1975) and ITV’s *Love thy Neighbour* (1972-1976). Gavin Schaffer, Sally Shaw, and Brett Bebbler have noted the ambivalent responses amongst audiences as the bombastic, white, male, and explicitly racist protagonists that script-writers and producers seemingly saw as a means of sending up racist attitudes were interpreted by viewers in often affectionate ways.<sup>11</sup> Yet this focus on the social-problem films and racial sitcoms has distracted us from much broader mobilizations of race on screen in the same period. Rob Waters’ work provides a valuable step forward as he examines broadcasters’ concerns in the 1960s and 1970s about the influence on both black and white British audiences of programmes featuring images of Black Power and America’s ‘race problem.’ As Kennetta Hammond Perry has noted, the fragile state of race relations in Britain and its articulation in

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<sup>9</sup> For film, see Amanda Bidnall, *The West Indian Generation: Remaking British Culture in London, 1945-1965* (Liverpool, 2017); Wendy Webster, *Englishness and Empire* (Oxford, 2008); Alan Burton et al. *Liberal Directions: Basil Dearden and Postwar British Film Culture* (Wiltshire, 1997); Lola Young, *Fear of the Dark: Race, gender, and sexuality in the cinema* (London, 1995); Carrie Tarr, ‘Sapphire, Darling and the boundaries of permitted pleasure’ *Screen* 26, no. 1 (1986): 50-65. On television, see Sarita Malik, *Representing Black Britain: Black and Asian Images on Television* (London, 2002); Stephen Bourne, *Black in the British Frame: The Black Experience in British Film and Television*, 2nd Edition (New York, 2001); Darrell M. Newton, *Paving the Empire Road: BBC Television and Black Britons* (Manchester, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> The British Broadcasting Corporation: First Conference on Immigrants, Broadcasting House, London, Tuesday 6 July 1965, Report of Proceedings/Programmes for Racial Minorities Policy, R78/1816/1, WAC; Newton, *Paving the Empire Road*; Bourne, *Black in the British Frame*; Anamik Saha, *Race and the Cultural Industries* (Cambridge, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Schaffer, *Vision of a Nation*; Brett Bebbler, ‘Till Death Us Do Part: Political Satire and Social Realism in the 1960s and 1970s,’ *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 34:2 (2014): 253-274; Sally Shaw, ‘Light Entertainment’ as Contested Socio-Political Space: Audience and Institutional Responses to *Love Thy Neighbour* (1972–76),’ *Critical Studies in Television*, Volume 7, No. 1 (2012); Gavin Schaffer, ‘Race on the Television: The Writing of Johnny Speight in the 1970s,’ in Laurel Foster and Sue Harper, eds., *British Culture and Society in the 1970s: The Lost Decade* (Cambridge, 2010).

the national and international press was facing increased scrutiny in the aftermath of race riots in Notting Hill in 1958.<sup>12</sup>

I argue in the following that we need to look at British ‘screen culture’ as a broader entity that consistently traded in racist imagery that underpinned notions of racial customs amongst both producers and audiences. I refer to ‘screen culture’ throughout this article to include numerous types of moving-image media produced and exhibited in this period, including feature-films, newsreels, amateur film or ‘home movies,’ and television. Such a broad focus highlights popular customs of minstrelsy and blacking up within British screen culture as an important antecedent to the *BWMS*. The *BWMS* began broadcasting on August 16<sup>th</sup> 1958, two weeks before the Notting Hill riots of August 30<sup>th</sup> to September 5<sup>th</sup>, but the passing mentions it has garnered in the works outlined above downplays both the show’s immense popularity and the programme’s peculiar relationship to concerns about immigration and racial prejudice in the period.<sup>13</sup> By 1963, the BBC’s Corporation Handbook reported that 16.5 million viewers were watching the show on Saturday evenings, making it the broadcaster’s top programme and easily dwarfing the 5 to 7 million viewers of *Till Death Us Do Part*.<sup>14</sup> The silence in current historiography on the *BWMS* likely stems, in part, from the exceptional nature of the show itself. Unlike the racial sitcoms or social-problem films, the *BWMS* appeared to be a singular phenomena in both its format—a variety musical show featuring uniformly costumed blacked up male singers and dancers, performing alongside a female dance troupe known as ‘The Television Toppers’—and its stage setting—which rotated between scenes that included the American Old South. Certainly, the overt blacking up at the centre of the show has accounted for broad discomfort at the programme’s existence. A *Radio Times* interview in 2011 with Ronnie Corbett, comedian and star of the popular show *The Two Ronnies* (BBC, 1971-1987), which produced a satirical sketch, ‘The Short & Fat Minstrel Show,’ in 1976, featured his ruminations on the *BWMS*: ‘how outdated

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<sup>12</sup> Rob Waters, ‘Black Power on the Telly: America, Television, and Race in 1960s and 1970s Britain,’ *Journal of British Studies* 54, no. 4 (2015): 947-970; Kennetta Hammond Perry “‘Little Rock’ in Britain: Jim Crow’s Transatlantic Topographies,’ *Journal of British Studies*, 51, no. 1 (2012): 155-177.

<sup>13</sup> “To-Day. BBC Programmes for the Weekend” *Times*, 16 August 1958: 3.

<sup>14</sup> Gander, L. Marsland, Daily Telegraph Television and Radio Correspondent. “16 1/2m Saw BBC ‘Black and White Minstrels’.” *Daily Telegraph*, 25 Jan. 1963: 13. JICTAR rankings for *Till Death Us Do Part* from 1965 to 1968, Broadcasting Audience Research Collection/University of Bournemouth, cited in Brett Bebbler, ‘*Till Death Us Do Part*.’



that seems.’<sup>15</sup> A *Guardian* review in 2015 of a television show based on the black actor Lenny Henry’s life noted that scenes depicting his performance as member of the touring theatrical version of the *BWMS* in the 1970s ‘make difficult viewing’ in the contemporary period.<sup>16</sup>

The BBC archive also tells a tale of uneasiness with the programme that has likely influenced the ability and willingness of historians to grapple with the *BWMS*’s popularity. The *BWMS* file contains just twelve pages, in contrast to the relatively thick files on other broadcasted programmes which house multiple exchanges of memos. A note from an archivist at the BBC Written Archive Centre, deposited in 2007, confirms that material relating to the programme was removed at some unknown point:

‘In the exchange of memos between Barrie Thorne (Chief Accountant) and Oliver Whitley (Chief Assistant to DG) on 19<sup>th</sup> May 1967 and 26<sup>th</sup> May 1967, there are handwritten notes (made by Registry staff) referring to where other related papers are filed within Management Registry. These references (to Registry Classification N0387 N0441) have been followed up, and these files were found to be destroyed as part of the BBC’s Records Management programme and have never been deposited into the BBC Written Archives Centre.’<sup>17</sup>

In this case, ‘records management’ possibly functioned as a means of addressing embarrassment about either the programme itself or discussions amongst producers relating to it. Consequently, historians have been left to examine those twelve pages and brief references to the programme in other files at the BBC’s Written Archive Centre. Any investigation of the programme must necessarily move beyond the written archive to gain a more complete picture of the programme’s immense appeal. In many ways, however, this

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<sup>15</sup> “Ronnie Corbett in His Own Words,” *Radio Times*, 31 May 2016, Original interview 2011, <http://www.radiotimes.com/news/2016-03-31/ronnie-corbett-in-his-own-words>; *The Two Ronnies*, BBC, Series 1, Episode 7, 22 May 1971.

<sup>16</sup> Stuart Jeffries, “Last Night’s TV,” *Danny and the Human Zoo*, *Guardian online*, 1 September 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2015/sep/01/danny-human-zoo-lenny-henry-enfield-whitehouse>

<sup>17</sup> James Codd, Dep Written Archivist 27/06/2007. ‘Black & White Minstrel Show’ R78/1, 921/1 WAC.

archival absence is a further element of a story about the claimed colour-blindness of both producers and audiences in 20<sup>th</sup> century Britain.<sup>18</sup>

The focus on a narrow range of activities at the BBC and ITV during the 1960s and 1970s, a related dependence on the written archives of both organisations, as well as the social-problem films of a limited number of directors has skewed our understanding of the historic existence of blackface as a type of racialised custom in British entertainment over a much longer period, from the 1920s through to the 1970s. Blacking up for entertainment was, as Kenneth Lamb's stated, 'a traditional form of entertainment in the British Isles for a great many years,' amongst professional actors and ordinary Britons and one that was newly affirmed, defended, and amplified in the postwar period when this practice was routinely featured on British television and films beyond the *BWMS*. Evidence of this custom is largely visual and housed within the wide variety of moving images that constitute screen culture. I further argue that the persistence of blacking up hinged on the acceptance of this practice by British audiences, who were imagined by white producers as colour-blind, or what Robin Bernstein has called 'racially innocent,' seemingly unable and unwilling to acknowledge racialised structures within forms of entertainment.<sup>19</sup> This article draws on works influenced by Critical Race Theory that examine the difficulties of majority-white populations in acknowledging racism as a useful framework for examining the concurrent existence of highly racialised screen content in Britain from the 1920s to the 1970s, and a persistent argument amongst both producers and audiences that this content was not racist.

I propose that recent works on colour-blindness and 'white fragility' within Critical Race Theory can offer a vital means of interpreting historic understandings of race within postwar Britain.<sup>20</sup> As Bill Schwarz argues, white British subjects were 're-racialised' in postwar

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<sup>18</sup> While the Hanslope disclosure has highlighted the activities of government officials actively shaping archives of empire due to decolonization, new understandings of racism in postwar Britain has also likely impacted archival holdings, and created related absences, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>19</sup> I am very much indebted to Bernstein's conceptualization of this term, which she uses as a framework for examining material culture in Antebellum America; Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Critical Race Theory has primarily been tied to sociology and legal studies in the contemporary United States, although recent works in Europe and Britain have engaged with this: Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*. 3rd edition, Revised (Lanham, 2010); Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham,

Britain as greater immigration by black and Asian colonial and commonwealth subjects prompted 'Englishness' to be re-articulated as an explicitly white identity and culture.<sup>21</sup> While Chris Waters, Camilla Schofield, Jodi Burkett, and others have documented the sometimes unintentional efforts of numerous groups, including sociologists, politicians, broadcasters, and even student activists to repeatedly define immigrants as 'non-English,' what has gained less attention has been what Kennetta Hammond Perry calls the 'mystique of British anti-racism,' or Britain's own colour-blindness.<sup>22</sup> International and domestic conceptions of postwar Britain as broadly anti-racist were rooted in three vital elements that underpinned immigration in postwar Britain: first, constant reminders that, politically and socially, Britain was not suffering from the formalized racial segregation that parts of the United States were; second, the largely voluntary, rather than forced, movement in the aftermath of World War II of an immigrant population with considerable knowledge of Britain as a result of colonial ties; and third, a collective willingness within Britain to see elements of Britain's colonial aims and the process of decolonisation as altruistic rather than primarily exploitative.<sup>23</sup> Together, these factors contributed to a complex rationale embraced by ordinary Britons, and indeed many immigrants as well, that posited Britain as racially tolerant. Works by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Charles W. Mills on 'colour-blind racism' or 'racial ignorance' have nevertheless argued that claims to racial tolerance or an inability to

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2016); Charles W. Mills, 'White Ignorance' in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, eds. (Albany, 2007); Robin DiAngelo, 'White Fragility' *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3 no. 3 (2011): 54-70; Reni Eddo-Lodge, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race* (London, 2017); Nikesh Shukla, ed. *The Good Immigrant* (London, 2017); Carol Anderson, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* (New York, 2016).

<sup>21</sup> Bill Schwarz, "'The only white man in there': The re-racialisation of England, 1956-1968" *Race & Class* 38, no. 1 (1996): 65-78.

<sup>22</sup> Hammond Perry, *London is the Place for Me*; Camilla Schofield, *Enoch Powell and the Making of Postcolonial Britain* (Cambridge, 2013); Chris Waters, "'Dark Strangers' in Our Midst: Discourses of Race and Nation in Britain, 1947-1963" *Journal of British Studies* 36, no. 2 (1997): 207-238; Kathleen Paul, *Whitewashing Britain: Race and Citizenship in the Postwar Era* (Ithaca, 1997); Jodi Burkett, *Constructing Post-Imperial Britain: Britishness, 'Race' and the Radical Left in the 1960s* (London, 2013).

<sup>23</sup> I acknowledge the important work of Laura Tabili and David Holland in highlighting pre-World War II immigration in the UK, while nevertheless noting that the immigrant population expanded considerably in the postwar period: David Holland, 'The Social Networks of South Asian Migrants in the Sheffield Area during the Early Twentieth Century', *Past & Present* 236 (2017): 243-279; Laura Tabili, *Global Migrants, Local Culture: Natives and Newcomers in Provincial England, 1841-1939* (London, 2011).

*see* race, usually held by white people, simultaneously deny the existence of both anti-black racism and white privilege, while supporting and authoring systems that uphold both.<sup>24</sup>

Historians of post-war Britain could fruitfully make use of this framework of colour-blindness to understand persistent historic disavowals of Britain's own 'race problem' in the postwar public and private sphere, alongside equally persistent evidence of just such a problem as articulated by immigrants themselves, civil rights campaigners, and other interested parties.<sup>25</sup> Attention to the historic existence of colour-blind racism can become a useful means of interpreting racially constructed silences, and in this case 'records management' within the archive. With *The Black and White Minstrel Show*, attention to colour-blind racism allows one to acknowledge and address the repetitive aspects of arguments by primarily white producers and audiences who claimed that a programme that clearly hinged on racial stereotypes and caricatures was 'not about race.' This framework also underpins a willingness by producers and some audiences to point to a much longer tradition of minstrelsy and blacking up as evidence of this. Within this rationale, white producers and audiences ultimately maintained their right to identify and name 'racism' on their own terms and at the expense of the black voices that had already been calling attention to Britain's own 'race problem.' Black audiences were imagined by white producers and audiences as suffering from a willingness to see race everywhere, including spaces of screen culture that were characterised as racially innocent.

### **'A traditional form of entertainment': Blacking up in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century**

As both Lamb and Murphy argued in 1967, the history of minstrelsy and blacking up as a form of entertainment is one that is vital to the framing of broader pleasures of racism on screen in 20<sup>th</sup> century Britain. The practice of white actors and singers donning blackface and performing 'blackness' was thought to be an import from the United States, where this form

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<sup>24</sup> Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists*; Mills, 'White Ignorance,' *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*.

<sup>25</sup> Works addressing epistemological gaps within popular knowledge of empire have touched on colour-blind racism within both government and the press. See Priya Satia, 'Inter-war agnotology: Empire, democracy and the production of ignorance,' in Laura Beers and Geraint Thomas eds., *Brave New World: Imperial and Democratic Nation-Building in Britain between the Wars* (London, 2012); Nicholas Owen, "'Facts are sacred': The Manchester Guardian and colonial violence, 1930-1932' *The Journal of Modern History* 84, No. 3 (2012): 643-678; Bill Schwarz, *The White Man's World* (Oxford, 2011).

of entertainment had a history rooted in the practices of slavery and post-abolition anxieties about reconstruction. Scholars such as Eric Lott and Stephen Johnson, working in diverse fields including theatre, music, and dance studies, as well as American history, have charted the multiple meanings that white audiences and performers ascribed to blacking up in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, while noting the stereotypes that these performances consistently relayed.<sup>26</sup> The trans-Atlantic transference of this practice into a British context demands attention to what blackface and minstrelsy offered to majority white audiences consuming these within a framework that also included the pleasures and performances of empire. In the British context, Hazel Waters, Michael Pickering, Tom Scriven, and, more peripherally, Anne McClintock have documented the practice's public as well as private meanings in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>27</sup> Scriven notes minstrelsy's formation of 'the archetype of black people as dim-witted, oddly-framed and fundamentally comical,' in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as white actors in blackface articulated British anxieties about black men in urban settings and the slippages of class and racial formation that accompanied this. Pickering documents just how ubiquitous both blacking up and minstrelsy were in Britain, arguing that 'variant forms of blackface caricature appeared outside the minstrel show, in media as wide-ranging as advertising, postcards, puppet shows, comics, and juvenile literature.'<sup>28</sup> The sheer wealth of material documenting the existence of minstrelsy provides 'abundant evidence not only of its apparent constancy but also of its cultural acceptability.'<sup>29</sup> The visual and also aural spectacle of blackface and minstrelsy ensured that the practice persisted on screen as cinema going amongst Britons increased throughout the interwar period.<sup>30</sup> Singers such as Al Jolson could be seen in blackface on screen in Britain in 1928's American feature film *Jazz Singer*

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<sup>26</sup> Stephen Johnson, *Burnt Cork: Traditions and Legacies of Blackface Minstrelsy* (Massachusetts, 2012); Eric Lott, *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (Oxford, 1993); William J. Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture* (Urbana, 1998); David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York, 2007).

<sup>27</sup> Hazel Waters, *Racism on the Victorian Stage: Representation of Slavery and the Black Character* (Cambridge, 2008); Michael Pickering, *Blackface minstrelsy in Britain* (Aldershot, 2008); Tom Scriven, 'The Jim Crow Craze in London's Press and Streets, 1836–39,' *Journal of Victorian Culture* 19:1 (2014): 93–109; Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather* (London, 1995).

<sup>28</sup> Pickering, xi.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Stuart Hanson, *From Silent Screen to Multi-screen: A History of Cinema Exhibition in Britain Since 1896* (Manchester, 2007).

and 1939's *Rose of Washington Square* where he sang 'Mammy,' as well as in the postwar biographical film *The Jolson Story* (1946).<sup>31</sup> British performers like G.H. Elliott modelled themselves after Jolson, gaining popularity for singing as the 'chocolate coloured coon' on stage and for BBC radio broadcasts throughout the 1930s.<sup>32</sup> By 1930, the practice of singing in blackface was common enough that Elliott took to referring to himself in press and advertisements as 'the original chocolate coloured coon' to distinguish himself from imitators.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, amateur minstrel troupes mounted their own shows between the wars, with one of the more notable being the London Metropolitan Police Minstrels (LMPM).<sup>34</sup> By 1927, the LMPM troupe had existed for 54 years and consisted of upwards of 40 men wearing blackface while performing skits and songs, as proceeds from the shows went to a number of police charities, including the Metropolitan Police City Orphanage.<sup>35</sup> The troupe was well known in London and endorsed by high society in 1929, when Lady Byng 'persuaded' the police Commissioner to allow the troupe to sing at midnight at her annual charity cabaret ball.<sup>36</sup>

The song and dance minstrelsy modelled by Al Jolson, George H. Elliott, the LMPM, and others were not the only form of blackface that British audiences were consuming between the wars. While minstrelsy stressed blacking up as part of the performance itself, blacking up in less overt ways informed common presentations of blackness on screen. On the silver screen, actors of colour seldom played people of colour. Instead, a lead or secondary actor with white skin would wear make-up throughout the film in order to 'pass' as black or Asian. Black and Asian actors often surrounded this white actor as extras, but the director and studio often assumed that a lead with considerable dialogue would best be played by a white actor blacked up. This approach also assumed audiences would either not notice the blacking

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<sup>31</sup> Al Jolson, *The Jazz Singer*, 1928. Released in Britain in 1947, according to Sue Harper *The Jolson Story* had a respectable 15,118 filmgoers for its first showing in February at the Regent Cinema in Portsmouth, and increased this to 18,413 in July 1948; Sue Harper, 'Fragmentation and Crisis: 1940s admissions figures at the regent cinema, Portsmouth, UK,' *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 26, no. 3 (2006): 392-394.

<sup>32</sup> Elliott's debut with the BBC, advertised by his stage name of 'The Chocolate Coloured Coon', was with the Aldershot Tattoo: "Aldershot Tattoo Broadcast" *Daily Mail* 11 June 1932; 4.

<sup>33</sup> Advertisements, *Daily Mail*, 15 April 1930; 16.

<sup>34</sup> The Screen Archive South East also holds a collection of films featuring 'Uncle Mack's Minstrel Seaside Show,' dating from 1911.

<sup>35</sup> 'Metropolitan Police Minstrels' Minutes 13.7. 1926, MEPO 5/136.

<sup>36</sup> "Times Change: People & their Doings, Onlooker." *Daily Mail*, 21 November 1929; 10.

up or share similar expectations about the ability of white actors to accurately ‘act’ black or Asian. Examples of films featuring blacked-up actors are numerous and include hits such as *The Drum* (1938), directed by Zoltan Korda, featuring the Canadian actor Raymond Massey in blackface as the Indian ‘Prince Gul,’ alongside other supporting characters such as the British-born Roy Emerton as ‘Wafader’ and Charles Oliver as ‘Rajab.’ In *Lives of the Bengal Lancers* (1935), the central antagonist, Mohammed Khan, was played by Douglas Dumbrille, another white Canadian actor, while the African-American actor Noble Johnson played the supporting role of Prince Ram Singh. The ubiquity of blacking up in the period is such that it is easier to identify films that featured black or Asian actors in speaking roles than films where blacked-up actors occupied these roles, like *Sanders of the River* (1935), starring the African-American singer Paul Robeson and actress Nina Mae McKinney.

Little evidence exists as to whether interwar British audiences explicitly recognised the blacking up of actors, but the existence of popular films that used passing through blacking up as a plot device would leave audiences in little doubt to the existence of this practice. In the empire films of the 1930s, British officers sometimes engaged in blacking up to undertake covert intelligence work. In *The Drum*, Captain Carruthers, played by Roger Livesey, is initially seen on screen blacked up and masquerading as an Indian man, complaining about the price of a rail ticket and begging for food.<sup>37</sup> In *Lives of a Bengal Lancer*, Lieutenant Barrett applies blackface in order to fulfil his Colonel’s mission to infiltrate a hostile tribe and later in the film, the lead character, McGregor played by Gary Cooper, and another officer don blackface themselves. In both *The Drum* and *Lives of a Bengal Lancer*, these officers are shown removing or donning blackface in front of a mirror with the aid of an Indian servant. This overt blacking up within the films emphasized the physical, linguistic, and cultural authority of these British officers and their ability to easily fool the locals with their masquerade. Korda’s *The Four Feathers* (1939) took this a step further and placed blacking up as central to the plot, as the main English character, Henry Faversham, successfully dons blackface to rescue his fellow friends and imprisoned officers in the Sudan. The ongoing inclusion of blacked up actors in feature films from the period

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<sup>37</sup> *The Drum*, 1938.



was so common that censors at the BBFC did not remark on the practice itself, but rather treated the characters by their projected racial identity.<sup>38</sup>

A rather different type of film, the amateur film or ‘home movie,’ demonstrates that a range of ordinary Britons were also blacking up in public environments in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century within local parades, pageants, and celebrations. Zoë Thomas and Tom Hulme have placed an overdue spotlight on historic pageants as a means of modelling various forms of citizenship and identity in the period.<sup>39</sup> Amateur films, shot from the 1920s onwards, are an excellent source for footage of historic and contemporary theatre, pageants, and parades, and indicate that these sites could be used to visually articulate stereotypes and affirm racialised boundaries by blacked-up men and women within predominantly white communities.<sup>40</sup>

Home movies housed in media archives across the UK such as the North West Film Archive (NWFA), the Yorkshire Film Archive (YFA), the Screen Archive of the South East, and the Media Archive for Central England (MACE) indicate that ordinary Britons used burnt cork and other material to black up, not only for the purpose of Morris dancing, but in clear imitation of African Americans, Africans, South Asian, Chinese and Japanese communities, and also North American ‘Indians.’<sup>41</sup> Groups of blacked-up participants can be seen wearing a range of clothing that equated blackness with poverty, such as tattered topcoats and black wool wigs. The existence of such practices, a type of local theatre which were captured by film, but not for film, indicate that the often upper-class filmmakers who could afford the expensive equipment of ‘cine-cameras’ were themselves intrigued by this spectacle.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Christine Grandy, ‘The Empire and ‘Human Interest’: Popular Empire Films, the Colonial Villain, and the British Documentary Movement 1926–39’ *Twentieth Century British History*, 25, no 4 (2014): 509–532.

<sup>39</sup> Zoë Thomas, ‘Duncan Tanner Essay Prize 2016: Historical Pageants, Citizenship, and the Performance of Women’s History before Second-Wave Feminism,’ *Twentieth Century British History*, 28 no. 3 (2017): 319–343; Tom Hulme, ‘A nation of town criers’: Civic publicity and historical pageantry in inter-war Britain. *Urban History*, 44 no. 2 (2017): 270–292.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas, 326–327.

<sup>41</sup> This material, while evident within the archives, has not been consistently catalogued to reference blackface or blacking up. ‘Minstrel’ remains a useful term for accessing this practice, but viewings of pageants and parades also almost inevitably offers evidence of the practice. For examples, see Miscellaneous: Morecambe, Heysham, and North Manchester, 1936–1937/North West Film Archive, and the Screen Archive South East whose catalogue features ‘blackface’ in the catalogue metadata.

<sup>42</sup> Heather Norris Nicholson, *Amateur Film: Meaning and Practice 1927–1977* (Manchester, 2014).

Image 1.

Melton Mowbray Carnival Scene, 1938/MACE

For example, in footage capturing Melton Mowbray's carnival in 1938, the camera zooms in on various figures in blackface and follows them for several seconds.<sup>43</sup> The cut-away immediately afterwards to a different set of costumed participants indicates that the local filmmaker edited the footage of the procession to grant these figures considerable screen time. There was little hesitancy in filming this charade, just as there was little hesitancy in performing the practice in pageants from the southern to northern regions and from the 1920s onwards, as well shall see. This was a seemingly traditional custom of blacking up captured on screen.

A discussion in 1930 in Scotland Yard, however, about the possibility of an international exhibition of a film featuring the London Metropolitan Police Minstrels indicates that there may have been a sense of dawning unease amongst officials about the appeal of minstrelsy to audiences outside of Britain. In February 1930, N.A. Pogson, Director of International Productions Limited, approached Lieutenant Colonel Sir Percy Laurie at Scotland Yard with a suggestion that the company make a 'talkie' film of the troupe's performance: 'a Police story to be mixed up with sentiment and thrills—the sort of dope that appeals to the cinema public of to-day.'<sup>44</sup> The LMPM had been previously filmed in 1917, when a short reel of its arrival at the Princess Theatre in Crayford, Kent, was shot, seemingly with the troupe's express permission as LMPM members play to a camera that was clearly situated to capture this.<sup>45</sup> This film is identified only as a 'local news item,' yet its staged elements indicate it was likely produced by a small production company hoping to sell the footage for inclusion in a newsreel. By 1930, however, increased understanding of the international reach of film played a part in the rejection of Pogson's proposal. Sir C. Royds, Assistant Commissioner 'A' of the London Metropolitan Police, when reviewing clauses of the proposed contract, raised this point:

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<sup>43</sup> 'Melton Mowbray Carnival Scenes,' Uncredited, 1938, 35mm/MACE.

<sup>44</sup> 3 June 1930, Minutes, 'Official Refusal to Make a Film' MEPO 2/3757 10281444

<sup>45</sup> This film can be viewed online through Film London: London's Screen Archive, and is held by the The Bexley Local Studies and Archives. <https://www.londonsscreenarchives.org.uk/public/details.php?id=16>

Once the film is made it will be exhibited all over the world without any control by Scotland Yard. At present the Minstrels perform only in certain selected London theatres or places of amusement; if this agreement is entered into they would in effect be performing everywhere and anywhere. I can conceive of circumstances or places in which the exhibition of such a film (say in America or India or indeed anywhere abroad) might be very injurious to our prestige.<sup>46</sup>

Further efforts by International Productions Limited to have the film made prompted the following response from the Met: ‘We impressed upon them...that any story which would in any way cheapen the Police Force in the eyes of the public or use them as a stunt would not be entertained.’<sup>47</sup> The Commissioner’s concern with the public reputation of the police as presented on screen echoed existing concerns and practices of the BBFC, which dictated that the police, alongside other British institutions, should be represented as capable and officious in their duties for impressionable audiences.<sup>48</sup> Yet, it was the Commissioner’s reference to the film’s reception in America and India, in particular, that indicates that he may have been considering audiences of colour, with Indian film audiences and American film audiences that included African-Americans foremost in his mind. This spoke to a dawning, although certainly not coherent, comprehension of black and Asians audiences as viewers likely to possess a different response to the practice of blacking up, and an ability to *see* racism, where white British audiences did not. By preventing the intersection of a race-based custom in London with the international medium of film, the London Met implicitly framed the blacking up of the LMPM as a racialised custom understood by white audiences in Britain alone.

This is a rare moment in the archive, however, and for the most part British audiences continued to be imagined as both white and eager to consume the practice of blacking up throughout the 1930s and World War II. Efforts to conceive of and then appeal to black and Asian audiences during wartime, as Wendy Webster has argued, were largely limited to the Colonial Office Film Unit and the documentary films it produced towards the end of the

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<sup>46</sup> 24 May 1930, ‘Official Refusal to Make a Film’ MEPO 2/3757 10281444.

<sup>47</sup> 3 June 1930, Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Christine Grandy, *Heroes and Happy Endings: Class, Gender, and Nation in Popular Film and Fiction in Interwar Britain* (Manchester, 2014).

war.<sup>49</sup> British film during wartime did begin to reflect, to some extent, the gender, regional, and class diversity apparent on the ground, as numerous historians have noted; yet British audiences continued to be imagined as primarily white.<sup>50</sup> Feature films produced in the United States, an industry less impacted by the war, still made use of blacking up as passing, such as 1942's *Arabian Nights*, featuring multiple actors blacked up alongside the Asian actor Sabu, even as popular film-makers like Frank Capra attempted to belatedly produce homages to African-American soldiers towards the war's end.<sup>51</sup> Photographs held at the Imperial War Museum also show that white British troops continued to engage in blacking up and minstrel performances in their leisure time.<sup>52</sup> Thus the racialised custom of blacking up and consuming images of blackface remained intact throughout the war for most white audiences, as documentaries featuring black and Asian faces operated on the fringes of the screen for what were viewed as fringe audiences.

### **Family viewing and blacking up on the big and small screens**

The advent of television broadcasting in the postwar period highlighted just how entrenched the practice of blacking up was within British entertainment, as it was given a new lease on life as wholesome family entertainment. While some feature films produced in the 1950s and 1960s made use of West Indian actors living in Britain, such as Earl Cameron and Errol John, the interwar empire films and American films set in the old South, previously discussed, were broadcast on both the BBC and ITV, bringing historic blackface practices to new generations of television viewers. This screen culture went largely unremarked upon, except by a few voices of colour left with the burden of declaring this material's broadcasting as racist. Rob Waters' spotlight on the British black and Asian audiences consuming images of the Black Power movement in the United States has an unfortunate

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<sup>49</sup> Webster, *Englishness and Empire*.

<sup>50</sup> Antonia Lant, *Blackout: Reinventing Women for Wartime British Cinema* (Princeton, 1991); Jo Fox, 'Millions Like Us? Accented Language and the 'Ordinary' in British Films of the Second World War.' *The Journal of British Studies*, 45, no. 4 (2006): 819-845. Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Britain Can Take It: The British Cinema of the Second World War* (Edinburgh, 1994); Sonya Rose, *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain* (Oxford, 2003)

<sup>51</sup> See Capra's, *The Negro Soldier* (1944); Thomas Doherty, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American culture, and World War II* (Columbia, 1999).

<sup>52</sup> Collection: George Herbert Simmons (flight lieutenant), Catalogue Number 2008-10-11, Photograph/Imperial War Museum.

counterpart in decisions by the BBC and ITV to continually programme content featuring blackface and to assert that this content was harmless, and indeed wholesome. This is an important and overlooked aspect of the wider custom of blacking up on screen that informed later defences of *The Black and White Minstrel Show*.

Broadcast listings indicate just how frequently films featuring actors in minstrel makeup and in blackface could be seen on British televisions. The central place of empire films in television broadcasting was signalled early on when the BBC televised an adapted theatrical performance of W.P. Lipscombe and R.J. Millney's 'Clive of India' for viewers on New Year's Eve 1956.<sup>53</sup> It was ITV, however, that broadcast the bulk of empire films from 1957 and throughout the 1960s, through its dizzying array of regional broadcasters, and all which featured actors in blackface.<sup>54</sup> In autumn 1957, ITV began a Saturday programme on ABC, its Midlands weekend broadcaster, entitled 'The Great Pictures of Alexander Korda.'<sup>55</sup> The draw of Korda's films had been stressed by ABC in a feature in *The Times* aimed at potential advertisers that highlighted programming decisions 'carefully measured by audience research,' that translated into 'more viewers' and included 'live plays, outside broadcasts, sport, serials, the great Korda film classics, and variety.'<sup>56</sup> In 1958, the same films were again broadcast as a Saturday programme, this time called 'Great Movies of Our Time.' Evidence indicates that the timing of such films fell within the 'watershed' period of family

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<sup>53</sup> 'Clive of India' was adapted for performance on BBC Television, B.B.C. Television. *The Times*, Monday, 31 December 1956; 3.

<sup>54</sup> On the numerous broadcasters holding regional licences, some with weekday but not weekend privileges, see Catherine Johnson and Rob Turnock, *ITV Cultures: Independent Television Over Fifty Years* (London, 2005). From the audience perspective and more, see Joe Moran, *Armchair Nation: An intimate history of Britain in front of the TV* (London, 2013) and Helen Wheatley, ed., *Re-Viewing Television History: Critical Issues in Television Historiography* (London, 2007).

<sup>55</sup> I.T.A. Associated Television 10.5: The Great Pictures of Alexander Korda—"The Drum" 'B.B.C. Programmes For The Weekend To-Day.' *The Times*, 28 September 1957; 4; I.T.A. Associated Television 10.5, 'The Great Pictures of Alexander Korda presents Sabu in 'Jungle Book' "B.B.C. Programmes For The Weekend." *The Times* 2 November 1957: 4; ITA, Associated Television, 10.5, 'The Great Pictures of Alexander Korda presents 'Sanders of the River,' "B.B.C. Programmes For The Weekend." *The Times*, 16 November 1957: 4; ITA, ABC Midland, To-Day. The Great Pictures of Alexander Korda presents 'Sanders of the River,' *The Times*, 7 December 1957: 3; I.T.A. A.B.C. Midland, 10.05pm 'The Great Pictures of Alexander Korda presents Sabu—"The Elephant Boy." B.B.C. Programmes For The Weekend. *The Times*, 28 December 1957: 4.

<sup>56</sup> ABC Television Network. *The Times*, 21 June 1957: 13.

viewing. In 1961, ITV regional broadcasters Tyne Tees, South Wales, and West of England all featured *Sanders of the River* as ‘Sunday Television’ at 3pm and 4pm, while a perennial favourite with broadcasters, *The Thief of Baghdad* (1940) with Sabu and a blacked-up John Justin as the Sultan of Baghdad, was shown in July, September, and December of that year.<sup>57</sup> The BBC began to include both interwar and postwar empire films in its programme listings in 1966, with Richard Burton blacked up as Dr Rama Safti in *The Rains of Ranchipur* (1955) and the Russian actress Eugenie Leontovich as the Maharani, broadcast in the prime slot of 7.25pm on a Sunday.<sup>58</sup> *Clive of India* (1935), featuring Spanish actor Cesar Romero blacked up as the Indian Nawab Mir Jaffar, was broadcast on BBC1 in 1970 at 3pm on a Saturday and described in the *Times* regular television programme listings as ‘a film for the family.’<sup>59</sup> The American film *Swanee River* (1940) featuring Al Jolson’s minstrel show was also broadcast on BBC2 in 1973 at the family viewing time of Saturday afternoon from 3pm to 4.20pm.<sup>60</sup> These are just some examples of the presence of blackface on television, framed by scheduling that positioned this content as classic and wholesome entertainment.

After broadcasting hours for the BBC and ITV were extended after 1972, the pressure to provide programming resulted in a marked increase of films featuring blackface on television. In 1975 alone, the following films were featured on ITV’s various regional broadcasters (of which some audiences, particularly in the south and the Midlands, could access more than one) and on the BBC: *The Four Feathers* (1939) twice in the year, on Anglia on March 22<sup>nd</sup> and London Weekend on June 28<sup>th</sup>; *The Thief of Baghdad* (1940) three times, on March 29<sup>th</sup> on Midlands, on May 26<sup>th</sup> on Thames broadcaster, and on August 25<sup>th</sup> again on Thames; *Khartoum* (1966) twice in the year, on Grampian on March 29<sup>th</sup> and Southern on April 12<sup>th</sup>; *Sanders of the River* (1935) on Westward on May 31<sup>st</sup>; *Go Into your Dance* (1935) (with Al Jolson blacked up as a minstrel) on BBC 2 on July 29<sup>th</sup>; *Elephant Boy* (1937) on Tyne Tees on August 9<sup>th</sup>; *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* (1935) on BBC1 on October

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<sup>57</sup> Tyne Tees, 3pm Film Festival, *Sanders of the River*, Sunday Television. *The Times*, 22 July 1961: 5: South Wales and West of England, 4pm Sunday Matinee, *Sanders of the River*, Sunday Television. *The Times*, 9 September 1961: 5: ITV, South Wales and West of England, 2:45pm *Thief of Baghdad*, Sunday Television. *The Times*, 16 December 1961: 5.

<sup>58</sup> Weekend television and radio. *The Times*, 24 September 1966: 3.

<sup>59</sup> “Saturday broadcasting.” *Times* 25 Apr 1970: II. Indeed, *Gunga Din* (1939) was broadcast on BBC iPlayer, BBC Two as recently as March 2018, after two broadcasts in 2015, one in 2012, and one in 2011.

<sup>60</sup> Broadcasting. *The Times*, Saturday, 14 Jul 1973: 8.

11<sup>th</sup>; and *Arabian Nights* (1942) on BBC2 on December 20<sup>th</sup>.<sup>61</sup> All of these broadcasting times, except two, were Saturday or Sunday viewings and all but two also fell within the watershed. The timing of these broadcasts is itself a key indicator of how producers and programmers imagined the responses of British audiences to such films. While Anamik Saha has noted the consistent marginalization of minority programming in the schedules of British broadcasters in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, programming from 1955 to 1978 indicates that both empire films and films featuring overt blackface on television continued to be imagined as a site of audience consensus.<sup>62</sup> British audiences, according to BBC and ITA files and press coverage, seldom protested the prime viewing slots granted to such films by producers. It was a lone voice in 1957 that spoke out, when *The Times* quoted, in part, a letter by M. T. Mbu to Associated Television of the Midlands, arguing that, ‘the film *Sanders of the River*, which was shown in the organization’s programme ‘The Great Pictures of Korda’ last Saturday night is ‘most damaging’ to Nigeria.’<sup>63</sup> *The Times* selectively reported on the complaint: “The letter asks of what use this film, ‘allegedly shot in 1935 or thereabout’ could be to anybody in 1957 ‘when all efforts are being directed to better understanding among nations of the world, particularly the British Commonwealth of Nations.’” In a denial of Mr Mbu’s effort to name the film and its broadcasting as racist, *The Times* noted that his response was not the majority response, arguing ‘many British viewers who saw the film would describe it as thrilling.’ Mr Mbu’s unsuccessful argument for the complete ‘withdrawal of this obsolete

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<sup>61</sup> The most reliable programme listings for both ITV and BBC are featured in *The Times*, although the *Daily Mail* also includes programme listings. Anglia, 7.55, *The Four Feathers*, Sunday. *The Times*, 22 March 1975: 10; Granada, Border, Midlands, *Thief of Baghdad*, Grampian, *Khartoum*, Pick of the weekend TV films *Daily Mail*, 29 March 1975: 16; Southern, 6:45 Film: *Khartoum*, *Daily Mail*, 12 April 1975: 16; Thames, 4:35 *Thief of Baghdad*, Broadcasting. *The Times*, 26 May 1975: 8; Westward, 10:55pm *Sanders of the River*, Broadcasting Saturday. *The Times*, 31 May 1975: 8; London Weekend, 3.05pm Film: *The Four Feathers* Broadcasting Sunday. *The Times*, 28 June 1975: 8; BBC 2 9.00 Film, *Go Into Your Dance* (1935) with Al Jolson, Ruby Keeler, Glenda Farrell, Helen Morgan. Broadcasting. *The Times*, 29 July 1975: 23; Tyne Tees, 10:30am, *Elephant Boy* with Sabu, Broadcasting Saturday. *The Times*, 9 August 1975: 6; Thames, 4pm, *Thief of Baghdad*, Holiday sport, of course, predominates (BBC1 10.55 am, ITV 1.5. *The Times*, Monday, August 25, 1975: 8; 1:55pm. *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* (1935), BBC1 Sunday. *The Times*, 11 October 1975: 8; BBC 2, 2:45, *Arabian Nights*, with Sabu. Broadcasting Saturday. *The Times*, 20 December 1975: 8.

<sup>62</sup> Anamik Saha, ‘Scheduling race’ in *Adjusting the Contrast: British Television and Constructs of Race*, eds. Sarita Malik and Darrell M. Newton (Manchester, 2017): 50-70; John Ellis, ‘Scheduling: The last creative act in television?’ *Media, Culture, and Society* 22, no. 1 (2000).

<sup>63</sup> “Film ‘Damaging To Nigeria.’” *The Times*, 22 November 1957: 6.



film,' was firmly aligned only with a minority of viewers who would not see the film as 'thrilling,' first and foremost.<sup>64</sup>

New empire films were also produced in the period and overshadowed the production of the social-problem films created by Basil Dearden and Michael Relph, and Roy Ward Baker. As Wendy Webster has documented, films such as *Guns at Batasi* (1964), *Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) (Christmas viewing in 1974), and *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) found receptive British audiences in both cinemas and on television.<sup>65</sup> Although Basil Dearden had made efforts to examine anti-immigrant prejudice in *Pool of London* (1951) and *Sapphire* (1958), and had cast Earl Cameron in both, his creation of *Khartoum* (1966) featured Laurence Olivier in blackface playing the Mahdi. Dearden's willingness to hire a white actor to don blackface indicates that this racialised custom was well entrenched amongst directors of a variety of political persuasions. The BBFC also did not note Olivier's blacking up in June of 1964 when they considered the film, but were instead preoccupied with "some of the belly-dancing" and "shots and sounds of panic, carnage and corpses" in the film.<sup>66</sup> Yet, Olivier's performance and the practice of blacking up were not without comment on its release in 1966. *The Times*' film critic referenced British comedian Peter Sellers, who had impersonated an Indian accent along with the comedian Spike Milligan as Mr Lalkala and Mr Banerjee, respectively, on the popular BBC radio show *The Goon Show* (1951-1960) and had blacked up on screen as Dr Ahmed el Kabir in the 1960 British film *The Millionairess*: 'We are given a formidable display of eye-rolling and lip-licking, a weird Peter Sellers-oriental accent and a valiant but unsuccessful attempt to disguise Sir Laurence's all too English features with false hair and green lipstick.'<sup>67</sup> This did not prevent *The Times* from concluding that this was an 'intelligent film' and *Khartoum* found a steady success both in cinemas and on television.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> BBC 1, 8:45pm, Dec. 25<sup>th</sup> broadcast, *Bridge over the River Kwai*, *Daily Mail*, 24 December 1974: 16-17; Webster, *Englishness and Empire*.

<sup>66</sup> Letter to Harold Buck, Production supervisor, Julian Blaustein Productions Ltd, 4 June 1964, 'Khartoum' BBFC/Soho Square.

<sup>67</sup> "An intelligent film about Gordon of Khartoum. From our film critic." *The Times*, 9 Jun 1966: 8.

<sup>68</sup> The film was shown in the prime slot of Christmas Eve in 1972 on multiple broadcasters (ITV London, Anglia, Southern, Westward, and Yorkshire, all at 7.25pm) and on New Year's Day in 1976; Christmas Eve. *Daily Mail*, 23 Dec 1972: 16-17; Television: Two Page Guide. *Daily Mail*, 29 Dec 1976: 16-17; New Year's Day TV. *Daily Mail*, 31 Dec 1976: 18-27. See also Max Jones, 'National Hero and Very Queer Fish': Empire,

In comparison, a social-problem film like Roy Ward Baker's *Flame in the Streets*, an adaption of a play *Hot Summer Night* featured on ITV's *Armchair Theatre*, had a relatively modest life on television. After three broadcasts in 1968 (on Southern, Rediffusion, and Grampian), it was shown only three times across the entire 1970s: on Sunday April 8<sup>th</sup> 7.55pm in 1972 on the Midlands Westward broadcaster, then for the first time in Yorkshire in 1973 at the dubious time of 11pm on a Friday, and on Westward in 1973, again in a late night slot of 10.35pm on a Friday.<sup>69</sup> In this regard, the social-problem films of the 1960s should be firmly placed within a broader landscape that indicates the frequency and regional broadcasting of these films.<sup>70</sup> Blacking up in films, as a form of passing, also persisted even as black-press publications like *Flamingo* and Claudia Jones's *West Indian Gazette* regularly featured the practice as problematic, and highlighted black talent.<sup>71</sup> For both periodicals, black actors were consistently losing out on employment opportunities within the industry, in favour of high-profile white actors in blackface.

### ***The Black and White Minstrel Show* and colour-blind racism**

As I have demonstrated, the broadcasting of both historic and contemporary films featuring actors in blackface had been established as a racialised custom within Britain's television landscape from 1957 onwards; nevertheless, this custom took on a more virulent life within

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Sexuality and the British Remembrance of General Gordon, 1918–72' *Twentieth Century British History* 26, no. 2 (2015): 175-202.

<sup>69</sup> Grampian 7.25. Weekend Broadcasting Programmes. *The Times*, 9 March 1968: 14; Rediffusion 10.30pm Television and radio. *The Times*, 21 June 1968: 18; Southern Television, 8.10 "Weekend Broadcasting." *Times* 26 October 1968: 19; 7:55pm Westward . Sunday. *Daily Mail*, 8 April 1972: 21; 11pm. Yorkshire. Entertainment/1 TV in Detain *Daily Mail*, 25 May 1973: 22; 10.35pm Westward Entertainment/1 TV. *Daily Mail*, 3 August 1973: 18.

<sup>70</sup> Raymond Durnat, "Two 'social problem' films: *Sapphire* and *Victim*' in *Liberal Directions*; Amanda Bidnall, 'The Race Relations Narrative in British Film' in *The West Indian Generation*. See also Lola Young, *Fear of the Dark: 'Race,' Gender and Sexuality in Cinema* (London, 1996). On regionality, see Helen Smith, 'Working-Class Ideas and Experiences of Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Britain: Regionalism as a Category of Analysis' *Twentieth Century British History* 29, no 1 (2018): 58–78; Rachel Yemm, 'Regional Media and Immigration in Postwar Britain' Unpublished PhD thesis (University of Lincoln, 2018); Shirin Hirsch, *In the Shadow of Powell: Race, Locality, and Resistance* (Manchester, 2018).

<sup>71</sup> For example, see 'Negro Heroine to be Played By Leslie Caron' *West Indian Gazette* 3. no. 2 (September 1960), 1; Bourne, *Black in the British Frame*.

made-for-television programming in Britain. The previous popularity of Al Jolson films and radio acts such as the Kentucky Minstrels with British audiences led to the BBC's trialling of a discrete one-hour programme in 1957 entitled *The 1957 Television Minstrels* which featured the Mitchell Minstrels, helmed by the popular musical director George Mitchell.<sup>72</sup> Reaction to the programme was positive, with Ronald Camp, television reviewer for *The Daily Mail*, referencing his own experience of blacking up: 'Tradition dies hard—and it is a long time since I blacked my face and sang *Swanee*...' Deeming the efforts of producer George Inns a success that would surely lead to an extension of the programme, Camp suggested, 'of course, he must ask Mr George Elliott, the beloved Coon, to come along once more so that we can all join the applause when he sings Lily of Laguna.'<sup>73</sup> *The Black and White Minstrel Show* began broadcasting on June 14<sup>th</sup> 1958 with an initial 8pm Saturday evening slot before moving to 7.30pm in 1959; a prime-time slot for its mix of highly choreographed dance pieces, regular solo performances by blacked up minstrels Leslie Crowther and George Chisholm, and guest appearances by comedians, actors, and singers who did not don blackface. The television show spawned a series of successful records featuring music from the minstrels, and a travelling theatrical show playing in community halls and theatres across the UK, as well as in the West End of London where by 1969, it had already run for seven years 'breaking every box-office record.'<sup>74</sup> Regular stories in the press about the minstrels, such as *The Daily Telegraph*'s 'Minstrels run out of make-up' headline in 1962, were featured as light human-interest stories.<sup>75</sup>

The popularity of the *BWMS* did not extend, however, to the entirety of Britain's population. The petition to ban the show was put to the BBC in May 1967 by CARD and 32-year-old Clive West, who was identified as a 'Trinidadian' by *The Times* and as 'an unemployed stoker' by *The Daily Mirror*.<sup>76</sup> West's petition was selectively quoted, with two lines from it repeatedly quoted in the press coverage: 'this hideous impersonation is quite offensive and causes much distress to most coloured people' and 'moreover it creates serious

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<sup>72</sup> Michael Pickering, 'The BBC's Kentucky Minstrels, 1933–1950: Blackface entertainment on British Radio' *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* 16, no. 2 (1996): 161-195.

<sup>73</sup> Ronald Camp, 'Just fancy-dancing girls in a Minstrel show' *Daily Mail*, Tuesday, 3 September 1957.

<sup>74</sup> "The Magic Of The Minstrels." *The Times*, 8 November 1969: 3

<sup>75</sup> Daily Telegraph Reporter. "Minstrels Run out of Make-Up." *Daily Telegraph* 12 January 1962: 13

<sup>76</sup> "BBC asked to ban the TV minstrels." *The Times*, Friday, 19 May 1967: 3; Paula James "Race Rumpus Over the Black and White Minstrels." *Daily Mirror* Friday 19 May 1967: 3.

misunderstanding between the races.’<sup>77</sup> Reporting on West’s role in bringing the petition to CARD vacillated between identifying the petition as a CARD initiative and hinting that West was a rogue affiliate.<sup>78</sup> David Pitt clarified in a letter to the editor of *The Times* in support of the petition that it ‘was drafted and circulated without our prompting’ by one of the 200 signatories.<sup>79</sup> West himself explained to *The Times*, ‘I requested to C.A.R.D that the show should be taken off as it depicts my race as a singing, dancing, laughing, idiotic people.’ He went on to elaborate both the reasoning and process behind the petition:

[The *BWMS*] is a laugh at the expense of a minority and it causes distress to coloured people by showing them as a race that cannot be taken as serious-minded citizens. The petition was a spontaneous effort and both white and coloured people have signed it.<sup>80</sup>

Contacted for comment by *The Daily Mirror*, West was quoted as saying that the show ‘makes a monkey out of us.’<sup>81</sup> West’s comments built upon views within the West Indian community previously voiced within the black press. The Dominica-born journalist, historian, and publisher, Edward Scobie, was instrumental in the creation of magazines that catered to what Scobie termed ‘a Negro voice’ that united ‘West Indians, British Guianese, Americans or Africans,’ while also aiming to attract white readers.<sup>82</sup> Scobie’s fourth and most successful magazine publication, *Flamingo* (which followed 1948’s *Checkers*, *Bronze* (1954-55), and *Tropic* (1960)) ran from 1961 to 1963 and circulated throughout the UK from its base in London. *Flamingo* featured an article on the Black and White Minstrels in its very first issue, entitled ‘Bad Taste B.B.C.!’<sup>83</sup> The piece opened with interviews with a number of West Indians of various professions, including a writer, theatrical agent and actress, and businessman discussing their reactions to the show:

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<sup>77</sup> James, *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> “BBC asked to stop ‘offensive’ minstrel show.” *The Birmingham Post*, 19 May 1967: 9.

<sup>79</sup> “The Wrong Target.” David Pitt, Chairman, Campaign Against Racial Discrimination.” *The Times*, 23 May 1967: 9.

<sup>80</sup> “BBC asked to ban the TV minstrels.”; James “Race Rumpus.”

<sup>81</sup> James, *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Flamingo*, September 1961 (Chalton Publications Co. Ltd. London): 1.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-25.

Lloyd Squires, a young West Indian businessman in Brixton has this to say of the *Black and White Minstrel Show*: 'I feel ashamed and disgusted when I see the antics of these coons on the programme. No one whom I know likes it. Some have told me that they switch off the moment the show starts and then feel uncomfortable and miserable for the next 30 minutes when they know that 'the fastest show in black and white' as the producers call it, is on the air.'<sup>84</sup>

*Flamingo* also quoted 'a young Englishman, Bob Dawbarn,' presumably white, who noted 'I just do not understand how Auntie B.B.C. which seems only too willing to ban folk songs or stop comedians from imitating politicians, can continue to put out this insulting show which is offensive to many people.'<sup>85</sup> Responses to *Flamingo*'s piece, however, raised a familiar refrain from *Flamingo*'s white readers. One reader, James Graham from Glasgow, wrote in response to the article, 'If we are to achieve better racial understanding in this country, it will be despite the complex-ridden 'Bad Taste B.B.C.!' of your September issue...The 'attack' on Negroes in the 'Black and White Minstrel Show' is manifestly no more degrading to Negroes than are the other countless show-business parodies degrading to us Scots...Bad taste Flamingo!'<sup>86</sup> November's issue featured a comment by the editors noting that 'the following letter sums up the position of a substantial number of readers.' The letter stated:

Most of my friends and I think that the 'Black and White Minstrel Show' is first-rate entertainment. I strongly disagree with your criticism and I am sure that it displays over-sensitiveness...In any case, 'Black and White Minstrel Show' surely should be regarded as a compliment by your West Indian and African readers. It shows how dominant people of Negro descent are in the entertainment world for the B.B.C. to emulate.'<sup>87</sup>

The argument that the stereotypes deployed on the show benefitted black immigrants preceded similar sentiments put forth by Stephen Murphy at the ITA. Both statements acknowledged that a stereotype might indeed exist, while arguing that this particular form of representation on British screens, which ran counter to negative news coverage of

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> *Flamingo*, October 1961: 2.

<sup>87</sup> Minstrels: A Defence. K.S.T. *Flamingo*, November 1961: 3.

immigrants documented by Schaffer, was a beneficial one.<sup>88</sup> In both arguments, the blacking up of white bodies as black bodies in order to achieve these distorted stereotypes of warm cheerfulness was not addressed; rather the minstrelsy was treated as a form of accurate imitation or passing.

*Flamingo's* article did not reach the BBC, according to existing records; however protests against the programme also became evident within the BBC. The BBC's own satirical programme *That Was The Week That Was* (1962-63) made a point in 1963 about violent anti-black racism in the US and the format of the *BWMS*, when actors impersonating the minstrels sang a morbid song about lynching. Prior to this, in 1962, Barrie Thorne, who would be Chief Accountant by 1967, complained to Kenneth Adam, then Director of Television, about the show. Although the original complaint is not in the *BWMS* file at the BBC WAC, Adam's indignant response is: "I yield to no one in my detestation of apartheid and the Little Rock philosophy. But to suggest that to continue a perfectly honourable theatrical tradition of the British music hall is a 'disgrace and an insult to coloured people everywhere' is, I submit, arrant nonsense."<sup>89</sup> When CARD submitted its petition in May 1967, such arguments were again mobilized. The BBC kept an eye on the press as a site of public feeling over two days on May 18<sup>th</sup> and May 19<sup>th</sup>.<sup>90</sup> It is unclear whether CARD or the BBC itself raised the story to reporters, but the papers unanimously endorsed the BBC's position that the *BWMS* was a harmless 'traditional' programme devoid of racist implications. *The Daily Mail's* coverage made a headline of the petition's argument, 'This hideous impersonation distresses coloured people,' before featuring a further sub-heading, 'Tradition' above the BBC's rationale for the blacking up within the show.<sup>91</sup> An unnamed 'BBC official' stated 'The Corporation has a strict attitude about the presentation of racialism in its programmes and we do not think the Black and White Minstrels offend in any way.' The official continued, 'the show is not about race. It is traditional, enjoyed by millions for what it offers in good-hearted family entertainment. The series is one of the few BBC shows that holds a regular place in the Top Twenty.' *The Daily Mirror* followed, with

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<sup>88</sup> Schaffer, *Vision of a Nation*.

<sup>89</sup> Kenneth Adam to Barrie Thorne, 11 September 1962, T16/175/2 TV Policy-Race Relations, File 2 (1955-1968) WAC.

<sup>90</sup> Extract from Minutes, Board of Management, 21 August 1967, R78/1,921/1 'Black and White Minstrel Show' WAC.

<sup>91</sup> Brian Dean, "'Ban them!'" *Daily Mail* 19 May 1967: 6.

‘Traditional’ again forming the subheading, and a rather more incendiary headline, ‘Race Rumpus over the Black and White Minstrels.’<sup>92</sup> The content of the *Mirror*’s reporting mimicked that of the *Daily Mail*’s, quoting the official at the BBC regarding ‘good-hearted family entertainment’ and the show as ‘not about race.’ However, the story described the signatories as ‘immigrants’ and added further evidence that the show was beloved by what it identified as 14.5 million viewers by quoting ‘Lady Constantine, wife of Sir Learie Constantine, the West Indies cricketer and diplomat’ who had been contacted regarding the story. Lady Constantine is quoted as saying ‘My husband and I take it as a show and have no objection to it at all. You might say we were fans.’ Lady Constantine’s endorsement of the show, while Lord Constantine was a member of the BBC’s General Advisory Committee, offered what the *Mirror* positioned as definitive proof of the BBC’s own argument. Yet Sir Constantine had expressed concern two years prior over blacking up within the film industry, at the BBC’s ‘Second Conference on Immigrants (West Indies)’ held in July 1965. Constantine stated to the Chairman of the BBC and participants that, ‘In films, I have always objected to white people blacking their faces to present certain pictures when we can get naturally coloured faces to do the job. There is something obnoxious about it to me,’ before going on to endorse the BBC’s efforts at ‘looking in on coloured people.’<sup>93</sup> Echoing the *West Indian Gazette* and *Flamingo*, it was the overlooking of black actors in favour of blacked up white actors that was the pressing and offensive issue.

The refrain that *The Black and White Minstrel* show was ‘not about race’ was persistent amongst producers and audiences of the programme. *The Times* quoted George Inns as ‘astonished by the protest,’ saying, ‘how anyone can read racialism into this show is beyond me.’<sup>94</sup> Letters to the *Daily Mail*, collectively grouped in a feature, ‘The Red Pink and Blue Minstrel Show!’ overwhelmingly favoured this argument as well.<sup>95</sup> Of the five responses printed (one by three signatories), only one endorsed CARD’s assessment of the programme. A letter writer, named as ‘Patience Jeeves’, wrote: ‘I was not surprised to read that coloured people have protested. Surely it is time that the ‘chocolate covered coon’ image was finally ended?’ The remaining letters, however, drew on familiar strategies meant to maintain the

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<sup>92</sup> James ‘Race Rumpus Over the Black and White Minstrels.’

<sup>93</sup> The British Broadcasting Corporation: Second Conference on Immigrants (West Indies) held at Broadcasting House, London, W.1, Tuesday 13<sup>th</sup> July 1965, Report of Proceedings, p. 25/BBC WAC.

<sup>94</sup> ‘BBC asked to ban the TV minstrels.’ *The Times* 19 May 1967: 3.

<sup>95</sup> The Red Pink and Blue Minstrel Show! D. A. Lockhart et al. *Daily Mail* 22 May 1967: 6.



colour-blind racial innocence of the programme. D.A. Lockhart from Surrey attacked an emergent political correctness, proposing that the show be renamed the Red and Blue Minstrel Show before declaring ‘Wait a minute though! Red and blue are political so we can’t risk that. Pink and green would be out for similar reasons.’ E. Allison-Webb, in an approach similar to Lamb’s, suggested that members of CARD were not properly viewing the programme and as such were not seeing the fun in the show: ‘Have the campaigners against Racial Discrimination [sic] have no sense of humour? Or do we have to change our every way of life?’ This last element, that this mis-reading of the programme and the broader accommodation of immigrants into Britain negatively impacted the lives of white Britons, was also inferred in the other letters. T. Oxlade from Islington wrote ‘If these people wish to be absorbed into the community, they should take the chip off their shoulders and join in the fun.’ The three signatories of the last letter, K.M. Ross, M. Grant, and R.M. York were rather more threatening regarding the consequences of reading racism into the programme’s innocent fun: ‘Has it occurred to the campaigners themselves that they themselves induce far more resentment by continually provoking the people of this country to anti-racial feelings?’ On May 22<sup>nd</sup>, the Head of Programming at the BBC had noted in a confidential meeting of the Management Board that ‘the Press had been severely critical of the basis of the petition and letters printed in the *Daily Mail* reflected the general view that the programme was not racially offensive.’<sup>96</sup> When the controversy was revived on August 11th by an article critical of the programme by Elizabeth Thomas in *The Tribune*, the Assistant Head of Programming had noted in another meeting of the Management Board that letters to the editors in the article’s aftermath had ‘all been strongly critical of the view expressed by Elizabeth Thomas.’<sup>97</sup>

What these discussions ultimately centred on was a struggle over who could legitimately identify and name racism in postwar Britain. West and CARD’s campaign highlighted how contentious this struggle was and how little power black and Asians in Britain had to author definitions of racism. The controversy pointed to the emergence of what was coming to be known as ‘political correctness,’ as white viewers and producers voiced frustrations with the naming of racist practices by immigrants. Further arguments outlined the *BWMS* and popular culture more widely as an arena that should be overlooked in favour of areas that obviously

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<sup>96</sup> Board of Management, Minute of 22 May 1967, R78/1,921/1 ‘Black and White Minstrel Show’ WAC.

<sup>97</sup> Board of Management, Minute of 21 August 1967, R78/1,921/1 ‘Black and White Minstrel Show’ WAC.

impacted the quality of life of immigrants in Britain, such as employment and housing. The oft-quoted memo from Oliver Whitley, chief assistant to the Director General, fell into the latter camp: “The best advice that could be given to coloured people by their friends would be: ‘on this issue, we can see your point, but in your own best interests, for Heaven’s sake shut up. You are wasting valuable ammunition on a comparatively insignificant target.’”<sup>98</sup> Indeed, the scale of issues facing organisations such as CARD were referenced by Pitt in a letter to *The Times* about its editorial of May 19<sup>th</sup>, titled ‘The Wrong Target:’

‘For over two years, we have documented the extent of racial discrimination in employment, housing, and services and have pressed the case for effective legislation to cover these fields. CARD published a detailed report last month on 43 of our cases, but the only part of it that received publicity in the press were 5 cases of complaints about police conduct. In contrast, the present petition is given widespread newspaper coverage and is then criticized for attacking the wrong target.’

Pitt noted that CARD’s ‘main target is racial discrimination,’ and his acknowledgement in the same letter that the *BWMS* was, nevertheless, an important ‘side issue,’ further points to the difficulties in identifying the impact of popular culture on audiences’ construction of race in the period.

While Pitt saw the goings-on of the screen as a side issue for CARD, producers and regulators of screen culture in Britain had spent years, and in some cases decades, imagining the screen’s impact on audiences. Censorship practices for British film and television are well documented.<sup>99</sup> The BBFC, the BBC and ITA were very well attuned to audience responses and a raft of non-governmental organisations, such as The London Public Morality

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<sup>98</sup> O.J. Whitley, 26 May 1967, R78/1,921/1 ‘Black and White Minstrel Show’ WAC.

<sup>99</sup> Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in 1930s Britain* (London, 2009); James C. Roberston, *The Hidden Cinema: British Film Censorship in Action 1913-1972* (London, 1993); Sian Barber, *Censoring the 1970s: The BBFC and the Decade That Taste Forgot* (Cambridge, 2011) David Hendy, ‘Bad Language and BBC Radio Four in the 1960s and 1970s’ *Twentieth Century British History*, 17, no. 1, (2006): 74–102; Curran and Seaton, *Power without Responsibility*; Lawrence Black, ‘Whose Finger on the Button? British television and the politics of cultural control’ *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 25:4 (2006): 547-575.

Council, The National Viewers' and Listeners' Association, and formal enquiries such as the Pilkington Committee, reminded these organisations of the fragile impressionability of British viewers. The advertising industry also depended on this very element.<sup>100</sup> Yet, when it came to constructions of race on screen, the audience logic articulated within these organisations was inverted to present audiences as deeply *unimpressible*. O.J. Whitley's memo on the *BWMS* also included his estimation of the British audience: 'it seems to be absurd to imagine that people who are not already racially prejudiced could possibly be in some way contaminated by the Minstrels. People who are already racially prejudiced are more likely to be exacerbated by the protest itself than the object of the protest.' By Whitley's estimation, the longevity of this practice in British entertainment resulted in an audience immunity to the racist elements of the practices and little chance of audiences absorbing these attitudes; all of which was in stark contrast to the careful treatment that the BBC gave to images of politics, class conflict, sexuality, or bad language on screen and on air, and which were consistently viewed as potentially shaping audience behaviour. The young Englishman Bob Dawbarn noted this race-based exception in his aforementioned comment in *Flamingo*: 'I just do not understand how Auntie B.B.C. which seems only too willing to ban folk songs or stop comedians from imitating politicians, can continue to put out this insulting show which is offensive to many people.'<sup>101</sup>

The West Indian audiences that *Flamingo* and *The West Indian Gazette* acknowledged in their consistent coverage of Britain's screen culture were not the primary audience imagined by the BBC and the British press for *The Black and White Minstrel Show*. The audience referenced by the press and the BBC was articulated as white, British, and devoid of the racial lens that American audiences were presumed to possess, based on the historic presence of African-Americans in the country. *The Times* editorial 'The Wrong Target' argued against CARD's characterization of the show:

'These are certainly not criticisms that come readily to the minds of most viewers of the show. The B.B.C. regards it as a wholesome family entertainment, and it is doubtful whether any but a handful of the 14,500,000

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<sup>100</sup> Sean Nixon, *Hard sell: Advertising, affluence and transatlantic relations, c. 1951–69* (Manchester, 2013).

<sup>101</sup> *Flamingo*, September 1961: 22.

viewers who regularly switch on had previously considered that it had racial undertones.’<sup>102</sup>

This ‘handful of viewers’ was the aberration and not the norm. *The Times* acknowledged, ‘It is true, for example, that a show of this kind would not be shown on American television but this is for obvious historical reasons. The ‘nigger minstrel’ show springs from the old South and Uncle-Tom-like acceptance of the divisions between white and black.’ In this argument, ‘historic reasons’ act as a euphemism for the presence of black audiences in the United States and the presumed wider racial sensitivity of American audiences. *The Times* went on to argue ‘Again, it is doubtful whether this strikes the average viewer in Britain.’ Yet, as Waters demonstrates, the BBC and ITV both carefully considered the impact on both white and black television audiences in Britain of images of the Black Power movement in the United States.<sup>103</sup> British audiences were imagined as fragile and impressionable when consuming this particular representation of blackness on screen, one that highlighted systemic white anti-black racism and organized, as well as militant, responses to it. Barrie Thorne at the BBC also used the controversy raised by CARD and the BBC’s own argument about the racial innocence of the programme, to request that an American audience have the final say on whether the show was racist or not:

One way of testing responsible opinion would be for the BBC to send the Black and White Minstrels book and the coloured *Radio Times* front cover of them to the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People and the Urban League, and ask for their opinion. The BBC might also ask the three American networks, since it is only a theatrical show, what reaction they think the series would have on responsible coloured opinion in the United States if it was put coast to coast.<sup>104</sup>

Thorne ended by arguing, ‘The theatrical tradition of the show could then be measured against the historical background and the continued fight against segregation going on in the United States, here, and elsewhere in the world.’ Thorne thus posited African-American

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<sup>102</sup> “The Wrong Target.” *The Times* 19 May 1967: 11.

<sup>103</sup> Waters, ‘Black Power on the Telly.’

<sup>104</sup> Barrie Thorne to C.A. to Director General, 19<sup>th</sup> May 1967, R78/1,921/1 ‘Black and White Minstrel Show’ WAC.

audiences as able to 'see' racism in ways that white British audiences and British producers were unable to do so. The historic presence of African-Americans, but not the relatively recent presence of immigrants in Britain, was thus central to the ability of white audiences to see race.

The BBC did unsuccessfully attempt to address some elements of the controversy in the two years following CARD's petition. The *BWMS* incorporated two black performers into the minstrels on August 5<sup>th</sup>, drawing a swift internal rebuke from the Board of Management indicating that the inclusion 'of two real negroes had broken the well-established convention of the coloured coon' and as Mr. Whitley noted, 'this might seem to run counter to the grounds on which the BBC had rebutted the recent petition by CARD.'<sup>105</sup> A show that was 'not about race,' threatened to acknowledge the opposite as it suddenly included two black performers. Two subsequent efforts to mount programmes that featured the Mitchell Minstrels without their blackface make-up were also short-lived. In September 1968, Brian Dean, television writer for the *Daily Mail*, made reference to the past controversy with CARD when he reported on the production of a new programme, *Masquerade*, in an article entitled 'The White-and-White Minstrel Show.' Even then, the BBC was reported as saying of the *BWMS*, 'It is not about race. It is traditional and enjoyed by millions for what it offers.'<sup>106</sup> In 1970, it was again Dean who reported on the BBC's failed efforts to avoid blackface on screen:

Two years ago, the BBC tried out a new Minstrel show *Masquerade* in which the men left off the dark-brown stage make-up and appeared, as it were, in the raw. They did it again in *Music, Music, Music*. But although it probably pleased the show's critics, it didn't please the viewers. The fact is that the traditional blacking-up *is* the Minstrel show.<sup>107</sup>

The Minstrels returned to their Saturday night slot on BBC1, while *Music, Music, Music*, which had been broadcast on Sundays on BBC2 at 7.25pm, disappeared.

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<sup>105</sup> Extract from minutes of meeting held on 14<sup>th</sup> August 1967, Board of Management, Confidential, R78/1,921/1 'Black and White Minstrel Show' WAC.

<sup>106</sup> Brian Dean. 'The White-and-White Minstrel Show.' *Daily Mail*, 19 September 1968: 3.

<sup>107</sup> Brian Dean 'A new funny man for the Minstrels.' *Daily Mail*, 14 March 1970: 4.

## Rangi Ram and ‘The Black and White Minstrels from Jockey Mead’

The publicly acknowledged ‘tradition’ of blacking up, however, continued in both film and television in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s. As well-known white comedians blacked up on screen, the celebrity of these actors in Britain tipped passing into a form of modern minstrelsy. In Peter Seller’s film *The Party* (1968), *The Daily Mail* reported that Sellers ‘darkens his face, puts on his favourite funny accent, and plays a ham-fisted Indian actor at large in Hollywood’ and starred as an extra in an old-fashioned empire film remarkably similar in its opening scene to *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* (1935).<sup>108</sup> The film was released in 1969 in Britain to tepid reviews, yet none, barring the *Daily Mail*’s brief reference, made any comment on Sellers blacking up.<sup>109</sup> The comedian Spike Milligan, who had worked opposite Sellers on *The Goon Show*, blacked up as an Irish-Asian immigrant, Kevin O’Grady in ITV’s short-lived series, *Curry and Chips* in 1969. Building on the success of *Till Death Us Do Part*, Johnny Speight’s new series quickly ran afoul of the Independent Television Authority, as Brian Dean reported that viewers protested “at the use of words like ‘wog,’ ‘Sambo’ and ‘coon’ in the 30 minute comedy.” Jagmohan Joshi, secretary of the Indian Workers’ Association, was quoted as saying, ‘My association will do everything in its power to get the show stopped.’<sup>110</sup> As Brett Bebbber has documented, internal audience surveys at the ITA demonstrated that the show was widely viewed, but audiences refused to acknowledge the show’s racial attitudes could influence their own.<sup>111</sup> However, Milligan’s Kevin O’Grady showed up again in an episode of the BBC’s *Till Death Us Do Part* in 1974 entitled ‘Paki-Paddy.’ The BBC would not shy away from blackface on television, as the *BWMS* continued to be shown until 1978 and new sitcoms featured blacked-up actors, such as *It Ain’t Half Hot Mum*, set in colonial India during World War II, which ran from 1974 to 1981. The white British actor Michael Bates played a leading role as ‘Bearer Rangi Ram,’ alongside two Asian actors, Dino Shafeek and Babar Bhatti, as a trio of Asian servants. Often shown slyly subverting the wishes of the British officers, the characters were nevertheless deeply rooted in stereotypes familiar to British audiences.

<sup>108</sup> Film. Cecil Wilson. *Daily Mail*, 6 March 1969: 14.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.; John Russell Taylor Film Critic. "A director's reputation and achievement." *The Times* 6 March 1969: 13.

<sup>110</sup> Brian Dean, “Curry and Chips Starts TV Colour Row.” *Daily Mail*, 22 November 1969: 1.

<sup>111</sup> Brett Bebbber, ‘The short life of *Curry and Chips*: Racial comedy on British Television in the 1960s.’ *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 11.2–3 (2014): 213–235.

Again, however, the blacking up merited little comment by commentators either within the BBC or the press.

It is when we turn to home movies from the period that we see how impressionable viewers actually were when it came to seeing the practice on screen. In the postwar period, local residents blacked up in explicit imitations of British screen culture, as entire floats in parades and carnivals featured men and women performing songs as black and white minstrels. In 1961, in the North West of England, Dr Derek Nuttall, a local filmmaker, captured the Bacup carnival procession that included children dressed as the *Black and White Minstrels*, amongst numerous other costumes.<sup>112</sup> In 1963, near Brighton, amateur filmmaker Cecil Cramp filmed the Horsham carnival procession that featured ‘The Black and White Minstrels from Jockey Mead’ on a float, dancing and wearing boater hats and blackface.<sup>113</sup> On August 25<sup>th</sup> 1979, a local film-maker in Rocester, Staffordshire, known as Humphries, took footage of the village festival which featured another float featuring adults blacked up in a blend of both the black and white minstrels and the ‘golliwog’ that featured in advertisements and labelling for Robertson’s ‘Golden Shred’ marmalade.’ The parade also featured two men blacked up, with one wearing feminine dress and carrying a large hand-written sign saying ‘Wogs of Rocester,’ while the other was dressed as a baby and being pushed in a pram.<sup>114</sup> A film-maker in Kegworth, who shot films of local carnivals over a number of years from the late 1970s into the early 1980s, captured a marching band blacked up and costumed like the black and white minstrels in one year, and a float in a subsequent year titled ‘Mississippi’ that featured adults blacked up and engaged in song and dance in imitations of the *Black and White Minstrels Show*.<sup>115</sup>

IMAGE 2. ‘Sharpe: Kegworth Easter Market and Carnival Parades 1977-1980s’/MACE.

Further films showing adults dressed as minstrels are also evident in collections in the Yorkshire Film archive.<sup>116</sup> The Moving Image Archive of the National Library of Scotland

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<sup>112</sup> Dr. Derek Nuttall, ‘Bacup Carnival 1961’/NWFA.

<sup>113</sup> Cecil Cramp collection, ‘Carnival; Last Train to Brighton; West Street’ 1963; October 1964; February 1965/Screen Archive South East.

<sup>114</sup> ‘Humphries: Rocester Festival 1979’/MACE.

<sup>115</sup> ‘Sharpe: Kegworth Easter Market and Carnival Parades 1977-1980s’/MACE.

<sup>116</sup> ‘Carleton Gala,’ 1972 DB 319/YFA is one such example.



also holds remarkable footage of 200 primary school pupils performing in woolly wigs and garish costumes as the Black and White Minstrels for an audience at the Bo'Ness Fair in 1974.<sup>117</sup> I suspect that much more exists in media archives, as practices of blacking up as either minstrels or other figures are not always identified in current cataloguing practices in a uniform manner, or at all. The existence of such footage indicates evidence of the very impressionability that normally preoccupied producers and regulators of screen culture in Britain, but which was ultimately refuted by decisions to place the black and white minstrels and other blacked-up actors on screen. The evident fun and pleasure that local actors experienced when blacking up spoke of the tradition of colour-blind 'racial innocence' that had long been associated with family entertainment in Britain. In the case of the Kegworth carnivals, which explicitly signalled a Mississippi setting, blacking up also continued to be associated with references to the American Deep South.

## Conclusion

Blacking up's framing as racially innocent in Britain sat at a crossroads of what was perceived as America's historic race problem *and* its historically black and white audience, as well as a customary practice in Britain that was sanctioned by media producers and regulators in the period, and by audiences themselves. This popular custom on British screens was largely untouched by efforts in the 1970s and 1980s to consider programming for 'racial minorities.' Minority programming pursued by both the BBC and ITV only facilitated the separation of minority immigrant audiences from the majority white British audience that producers of Britain's screen culture had already been serving from the interwar period onwards. Further entreaties from the 1960s by Sir Learie Constantine and others to broaden the inclusion of racial minorities as actors seemed to have little effect, and by 1972 a confidential report produced for the BBC's Audience Research Department by Professor Bradley S. Greenberg of Michigan State University, entitled 'Non-Whites in British Television,' showed a woeful lack of racial diversity on British television, as measured over a week's viewing in 1971. The report's aim was to gather data because 'both the BBC and the ITV have been approached by groups advocating greater presentation of non-whites on television,' and 'no meaningful data exist as to the current practice.' Just 0.04% of the actors within drama, variety, and feature film programming were identified as

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<sup>117</sup> Bo'Ness fair, Reference #7793, 1974, Director: Michael Alexander, Pelicula Film, 16mm, The Moving Image Archive/The National Library of Scotland, footage commencing at 26:08.

‘non-white’, in comparison to a BME population at the time that was stated in the report as 2.5%.<sup>118</sup> Of this 0.04% representation, the majority were actors in American shows, which included Hawaiians featured in *Hawaii 5-0*, broadcast on ITV at the time, and the overwhelming majority of roles were non-speaking.

The ongoing presence of blackface and minstrelsy on both British film and television from the 1920s to the 1970s indicates the role that film producers and organisations such as the BBFC, BBC, and ITV played in shaping the ability of ordinary white Britons to both see and acknowledge racism. The broadcasting of ‘traditional’ wholesome pleasures of blacking up, televised on a weekly basis for 20 years until 1978, when *The Black and White Minstrel Show* went off the air, and buttressed by other material discussed here that pre-dated the existence of the *BWMS*, ultimately silenced discussions of racism within screen culture and society more widely under the guise of colour-blindness. Black and Asian people who were asked to deny, or more rarely affirm, minstrelsy and blacking up as racist were thus burdened with the task of naming racism to organisations and audiences who clearly did not want to name it as such and were highly defensive of this custom. Identifying blackface as racist prompted the cries of white audiences and producers who denied or resented both the authority of black and Asian immigrants to name British customs as problematic, and who denied their own central roles as a majority white audience catered to by a media which was itself highly dependent on the appeal of racialised screen content to audiences. Efforts by *Flamingo*, CARD, and others to acknowledge racism within screen culture were accompanied from the late 1960s onwards by complaints within media organisations and the press about an emergent language of political correctness, which further characterised Britain’s own audiences of colour as a highly sensitive minority that suffered from seeing race everywhere. As Gavin Schaffer notes, television producers would only begin to carefully examine issues of racial representation with majority white audiences after the political gains of the National Front in 1973.<sup>119</sup> Even with this shift, the colour-blind British audience that film and television producers ultimately imagined as their majority was still able and encouraged to enjoy the unstated and unacknowledged, but consistently met, traditional pleasures of blacking up and minstrelsy on screen in film and television.

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<sup>118</sup> R78/2,538/1 ‘Programmes for Racial Minority: General’ An Audience Research Report (Confidential) VR/72/56, 16.02.72 ‘Non-Whites in British Television,’ WAC.

<sup>119</sup> Schaffer, *Vision of a Nation*.

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