DECOLONIZING RACIALIZED TOYS: A BIOGRAPHICAL STUDY OF THE JOLLY N-WORD MECHANICAL BANK

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SYNOPSIS

This paper examines the Jolly N-word Mechanical Bank, a late nineteenth-century racialized toy housed in the Facing Blackness Collection at the Black Archives, Amsterdam. Through the combined frameworks of artifact biography and decolonial visual practice, the study interrogates how seemingly innocuous domestic objects functioned as vehicles for anti-Black caricature and colonial ideology. Addressing a gap that often treats such objects as passive or merely illustrative, the study foregrounds racialized toys as mechanisms through which anti-Black ideology was normalized in everyday domestic life.

The paper further explores how provenance study and digital illustration serve as counter-narrative tools, transforming an object of racial subjugation into a site of critical engagement, cultural memory, and Black resilience. By recontextualizing the mechanical bank within a decolonial framework, this research contributes to ongoing conversations on representation, restitution, and the ethical reimagining of colonial-era collections.

Figure 1. J. E. Stevens, Jolly N-word Piggy Bank (Top Hat), c. 1896. Facing Blackness Collection, The Black Archives.

ENCOUNTERING THE JOLLY N-WORD MECHANICAL BANK

The popularity of racialized toys and mechanical banks reflected fear-driven responses to the perceived intrusion of people of African descent into the social and cultural spaces of white middle-class European communities. When I first encountered the Jolly N-word Mechanical Bank in the Facing Blackness Collection at the Black Archives, I experienced a complex mix of emotions anger, sadness, and profound curiosity. I found myself questioning how such seemingly "innocent" playthings could shape young minds, and how children exposed to these objects might internalize and interpret notions of race when encountering people of African descent. Class based oppression are taught to children through various cultural media, including toys and games (Barton,Somerville 47). While much scholarly attention has focused on the visual portrayals and stereotypes embedded in racialized toys, far less research has examined how these objects articulated broader cultural values and social movements in late nineteenth-century Europe, or how the colonial ideologies they embodied persisted, largely unchallenged, into the twenty-first century. As a result of the Industrial Revolution, the mass production of objects designed specifically for children expanded rapidly, with large-scale toy manufacturing emerging in the Americas in the mid-nineteenth century and soon developing into a major commercial industry in Europe. These mass-produced toys included dolls, trains, books, and board games.

According to Wilkie, *"toys functioned as a medium of communication between children and adults, reinforcing social norms and expected behaviours."* During the Victorian era, many toys were designed to instil gender roles, moral values, and a strong sense of nationalistic pride. At this time, toys were often explicitly categorized for male or female children. Notably, the category of mechanical banks reveals how notions of commerce and financial discipline were framed as masculine ideals, leading these objects to be marketed primarily toward boys rather than girls.

Of all the racist memorabilia encountered during this research, no racial group was depicted more frequently amongst the nineteenth-century toys than people of African descent. Barton and Somerville's study underscore this disparity, revealing that within a sample of 103 toys, 83 approximately 80.6 percent, were depictions of African descent (Barton and Somerville 60). These racist memorabilia did not merely depict scenes of play; they also reinforced narratives of economic oppression and racial hierarchy. These objects frequently emphasized the limited employment opportunities available to people of color, relegating individuals of African descent to menial labor such as washing, nanny work, farm work, portering, and other forms of servitude. By repeatedly associating people of African decent with low-status occupations, these toys normalized racialized labor divisions, an example of which can be seen in objects like Tip the Bell Boy.

Figure 2. Joan Spero, Collectible Toys and Games of the Twenties and Thirties from Sears, Roebuck and Co. Catalogs (New York: Dover, 1988), 66.

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descent engaged in survival strategies such as street vending, they were often stigmatized as lazy or mischievous, directly opposing the work ethic and social norms celebrated by white American society. A mechanical toy that embodied this reactionary perspective was the Moving Apple Man (see Figure below).

Figure 3. Moving Apple Man, reproduced from R. S. Barlow, The Great American Antique Toy Bazaar: 5,000 Old Engravings from Original Trade Catalogs, 1879–1946 (Windmill, California: Windmill, 1998), 139.

ORIGIN AND DESIGN

The creation of mechanical toys that depicted people of African descent in degrading situations, such as being struck, falling, having their teeth yanked, or engaging in racialized tropes like eating watermelon or stealing chicken can be understood within a longer historical continuum of racial violence and dehumanization. From the moment enslaved Africans arrived in Virginia in 1619, they were subjected to extreme coercion: treated as cargo rather than human beings, sold at auction, physically inspected and priced, separated from family and kin networks, and stripped of legal personhood under emerging slave codes that institutionalized racial slavery. Approximately 263 years after the arrival of the first slave ships in Jamestown, these mechanical toys emerged in the late nineteenth century, revealing how deeply entrenched narratives of Black inferiority persisted well after slavery's formal abolition. Rather than marking a rupture from the past, such objects demonstrate how people of African descent continued to be defined, disciplined, and demeaned through popular visual culture more than two and a half centuries later.

Figure 4. 1619: Dutch Deliver First Slaves to Virginia. Taylor'sTenEvents,Taylorstenevents.weebly.com

On March 14, 1882, Charles G. Shepard and Peter Adams, Jr., of Buffalo, New York, were granted U.S. Patent No. 255,090 for the invention of the Jolly N-word Mechanical Bank (Schreckinger). The object was painted to signify racial difference, with the face, hair, and hands rendered in black to evoke a caricatured representation of a man of African descent.

Its facial features were deliberately exaggerated, drawing on established racial stereotypes rather than realistic human likeness. The mechanically activated grin transformed the figure's face into a performative site of mockery, compelling interaction while reinforcing anti-Black visual ideology through play.

The mechanism of the Jolly Mechanical Bank operates in a straightforward manner. When a coin is placed in the figure's right hand and a lever at the back is pressed, the eyes roll upward, the tongue retracts, and the right arm lifts the coin, flipping it into the figure's open mouth, where it drops into the interior of the bank. As noted by Sy Schreckinger in Antique Toy World (December 1983), the Jolly Mechanical Bank achieved considerable popularity during its period of manufacture. This success may have been due in part to its affordable price of sixty cents, its durable construction, and, notably, its appeal as a racially caricatured novelty.

Figure 5, Montgomery Ward and Co. ad. circa 1889

According to Sy Schreckinger, the production of these racist memorabilia extended far beyond the Americas, reaching England, France, Germany, Spain and Canada. Across these regions, the objects acquired a variety of names, including Jolly Nigger High Hat, Little Hi-Hat, Little Moe Little Joe, Sambo, Greedy Nigger Boy, Darky Bust, and African Native, among many others.

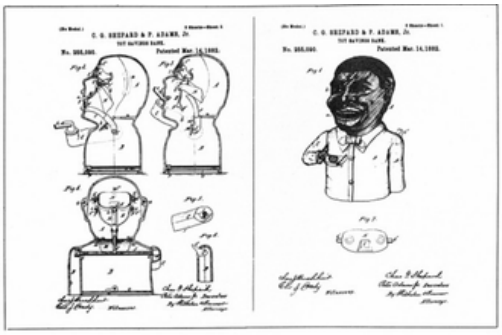

Figure 6, Jolly N-Word Mechanical Bank, Antique Toy World Magazine, Dec. 1983.

THE LEGACY OF BLACK FACE

December 6th in the Netherlands marks the celebration of St. Nicholas Day, honoring Saint Nicholas, a fourth-century bishop from what is now Turkey. In Dutch tradition, Saint Nicholas is said to arrive by boat from Spain and is revered as the patron saint of children, sailors, and the city of Amsterdam.

He is traditionally accompanied by a figure known as Zwarte Piet a comic character with black skin color, who is portrayed as his assistant a role that has become the subject of significant historical debate and contemporary controversy due to its racialized depiction and associations.In New Light on Zwarte Piet: An Art Historical Answer to the Question of the Origin of Zwarte Piet, Eugenie Boer-Dirks observes that early studies of theDutch Sinterklaas tradition do not mention the character Zwarte Piet.

In his major 1831 study, Professor W. A. van Hengel focused exclusively on Saint Nicholas and made no reference to any comic or secondary figure. This absence suggests that Zwarte Piet was not part of the tradition from its inception but emerged at a later historical moment (Boer-Dirks). In the nineteenth century, German folklorists and mythologists began to argue that many Christian festivals were adapted from older pagan rituals. Jacob Grimm suggested that Saint Nicholas replaced the pagan god Wodan (Odin) after Christianisation, and that figures associated with Wodan were reinterpreted within Christian traditions.

Figure 7. Frithowulf, Hrothsige. Zwarte Piet: Features, Origin, and Controversies. Malevus, 5 Dec. 2023.

The continued inclusion of the character Zwarte Piet in the celebration of Saint Nicholas Day remains deeply tied to the historical dehumanization of people of African descent. The role did not inherently require a racialized figure; it could just been imagined as a *fairy*, a *magical helper*, *an angel* or *any non-human character* tasked with carrying gifts or assisting Saint Nicholas. Instead, the choice to position a Black caricature as the subordinate companion reflects deliberate cultural decisions rooted in colonial and racial hierarchies. By embedding Zwarte Piet into tradition and passing it down for decades, the celebration has normalized mockery and reinforced degrading stereotypes that depict African descents as inferior, childish, lazy, or threatening. These images, introduced to young children as festive and harmless, leave lasting impressions that sustain racial prejudice across generations and continue to reproduce anti-Black narratives within European cultural memory.

Blackface is defined on as the practice in which performers use burned cork, shoe polish, or theatrical makeup to create exaggerated and caricatured representations of people of African descent in stage performances and popular entertainment.
Broadening this historical perspective, Ayanna Thompson, Regents Professor of English and Director of the Arizona Center for Medieval & Renaissance Studies at Arizona State University, explains in her 2021 Smithsonian Magazine article “Blackface Is Older Than You Might Think” that the practice “blackface” predates modern minstrelsy and was already present in medieval Europe. Thompson observes that substances such as bitumen and coal soot were frequently used to darken the skin in theatrical and religious performances to represent corrupted souls, demons, or moral transgression, thereby creating early visual associations between darkness, evil, and racialized otherness.

In my view, the practice of individuals of European descent painting their faces black during certain end-of-year holidays can be understood in two troubling ways. First, it reflects a persistent ignorance of the emergence of multiracial societies in the twentieth century and beyond. Second, it constitutes a deeply uncomfortable continuation of a tradition in which a single character Zwarte Piet is deliberately designed to embody degrading stereotypes of people of African descent as foolish, subservient, childish, or purely comic. This raises the question of whether there is a collective amnesia surrounding the history and violence of slavery and racial oppression in Europe.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that, for some European communities, this practice has been normalized over time and is perceived as harmless tradition. However, this perspective does not resolve the central issue: why must the tradition rely so insistently on racial caricature? Why is the act so intentional, and why is humor so often derived from the ridicule of people of African descent? The persistence of such imagery suggests that the tradition’s meaning cannot be separated from its racialized foundations and the harm they continue to reproduce.

In the 2020 editorial by Bel Parnell-Berry and Noémi Michel, “(De-)Facing the Dark Face of Europe: The Ongoing Struggle Against Blackface and Anti-Black Racist Imagery,” Michel recounts a personal encounter during the Course de l’Escalade, a popular public race in Geneva, Switzerland . During the event, she observed white participants dressed as caricatured figures labeled *“Africans,” “Indians,” and “primitives.”* This unexpected confrontation with blackface, she explains, serves as a stark reminder that joy and festivity remain conditional for those who do not belong to the white majority. Michel narrates a moment when, exhausted by repeated encounters of this nature, she considered confronting a couple in blackface who were resting nearby after the race, dressed as what she describes as *“savage Africans.”* However, the white companions attending the event with her discouraged the confrontation, urging her to ignore the incident by insisting that it was *“just a festivity”* and *“meant for laughter.”* Reflecting on this moment, Michel expresses regret for having deferred to their comfort rather than honoring her own unease. She concludes with a powerful ethical reflection, imagining what she wishes she had said both to her companions and to the individuals in blackface: if the expression of her pain is perceived as a disruption of their joy, then that joy is fundamentally dependent on the suppression of hers. She questions whether celebration truly requires the dismissal or consumption of another person’s dehumanization in order to exist.

It is striking that once Zwarte Piet became embedded in the Sinterklaas tradition in 1850, history seemed to repeat itself. The character reinforced racial hierarchy through the production of toys, books, festivity, and decorations, transmitting these ideas across generations and rendering them seemingly natural and unquestionable. In this process, people of African descent were consistently depicted as comic, subordinate, or mischievous. Even after a century and 75 years, this cycle of derogatory representation persists, shaping contemporary narratives and continuing to influence new media and cultural expressions.

Figure 8. Zwarte Piet toy figures from the Netherlands, from "A Tale of Two Toys," St. Nicholas Center, StNicholasCenter.org,

Importantly, communities of African descent in the Netherlands have, over the years, intensified their protests against Zwarte Piet, leading to tangible and sustained progress. As reported by Dutch News in February 2025, Jerry Afriyie, a leading figure in the Kick Out Zwarte Piet (KOZP) movement founded in 2010 reiterated that the campaign was always envisioned as a time-bound struggle culminating in 2025. Afriyie noted that earlier generations of anti-racist activists often burned out due to the absence of clear endpoints. KOZP was therefore established with three core objectives: expanding public education and awareness about slavery, advocating for a national day commemorating the abolition of slavery, and ending the racist Zwarte Piet stereotype.

This movement is best understood as a grassroots anti-racist and decolonial social justice movement, combining public protest, education, and cultural intervention. Institutions such as The Black Archives, a cultural and knowledge center in Amsterdam, have played a leading role in advancing awareness, preserving activist histories, and supporting these efforts through research, exhibitions, and public programming.

Figure 9. Kick Out Zwarte Piet archival material from The Black Archives digital collection, The Black Archives, Amsterdam.

Figure 10. Kick Out Zwarte Piet archival material from The Black Archives digital collection, The Black Archives, Amsterdam.

According to the St. Nicholas Center, public attitudes in the Netherlands shifted significantly following the global Black Lives Matter protests. Support for the traditional blackface portrayal of Zwarte Piet declined sharply, falling from 89% in 2013 to just 47% by June 2020.

The main aim of this research is to explore how object biography and digital illustration can serve as counter-narrative tools to transform objects of racial subjugation. As protests against Zwarte Piet intensified, the character was gradually reconfigured to address growing criticism. According to the St. Nicholas Center, Zwarte Piet shifted from a *"black servant"* primarily responsible for discipline to "*a fun-loving, joking sidekick to a more distant Sinterklaas,"* performing acrobatic stunts and distributing treats. When I encountered the term *"sidekick"* , I immediately thought of the numerous comic heroes and their companions, secondary characters who support the hero in the story, such as Dr. John Watson from Sherlock Holmes, Robin from Batman, and Buzz Lightyear from Toy Story. These sidekicks provide comic relief, moral guidance, or emotional grounding, and often possess their own strengths, cleverness, courage, and morality. Yet, despite these comparisons, I remain optimistic: what will be the next chapter in the ever-evolving story of Zwarte Piet, *Can a character that was once used to mock and demean be reimagined in today's digital age, where there is a growing emphasis on creating and redefining inclusive and transformative narratives?*

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