"How ELSE are you supposed to dress up like a Black Guy??": negotiating accusations of Blackface in online newspaper comments

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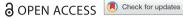
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ABSTRACT
This study examines how individuals talk about race and racism, and the resonance of their discourses with existing narratives. For this purpose, this article investigates users' comments ($N = 887$) on four newspaper articles from the US and France about Antoine Griezmann's Blackface in December 2017. A thematic analysis revealed (i) the vast majority of users shared similar views of racism by emphasizing individual agency over structural and historical systems of oppression. Although (ii) users actively referred to colour-blindness, their comments appeared to be based on different understandings of "race" shaped by national discourses. Finally, (iii) users vastly criticized political correctness, which revealed expressions of Whiteness as well as the intersection of class and racism. The findings underline the gap between users' views and scholarly discourses. This study also highlights the limitations of methodological nationalism in the study of racism, and importance of examining discourses emanating from various imagined communities instead.

Introduction

Scholars have addressed the differences that characterize discourses of race and racism in the US and in European countries (Essed and Trienekens 2008), simultaneously revealing a certain degree of unity within Europe in that regard (Goldberg 2006; Salem and Thompson 2016). Many studies have explored the practical and theoretical implications of racial relations in the US (e.g. Bonilla-Silva 2010, 2015; Omi and Winant 1994). Within the French context, studies have underlined the complex relations between

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race, France's colonial past, and the country's universalist republican framework (e.g. Fila-Bakabadio 2011; Mbembe 2005).

Informed by cultural studies which explore the discursive construction of social and cultural realities in relation to media and popular culture (Hall 1997), this study focuses on Blackface. This issue provides relevant grounds to compare and contrast users' comments on a specific form of racism that is tied with the racial history of both the US and France but is not equally contested in both countries. This article focuses on a specific case of Blackface. On 17 December 2017, Antoine Griezmann, a prominent member of the French national football team, posted a picture of himself on Twitter dressed up as a player from the Harlem Globetrotters. The morning after, in reaction to many tweets accusing him of Blackface, Antoine Griezmann posted a message on the same platform asking people to "calm down" and explaining that his costume was "a tribute". This controversy was later reported in traditional media. Although Blackface is rarely discussed in the dominant public sphere in France, a few recent incidents have given it more visibility (e.g. Blackface in Sorbonne in 2019 (Willsher 2019); debate about the "Nuits des Noirs" during the Dunkirk carnival in 2018) and echo other growing popular discussions about the status of Blacks in France (e.g. the book "Noire n'est pas mon métier" by Black French actresses published in 2018 (Khan 2018)).

Focusing on Griezmann's Blackface constitutes a relevant case to apprehend the way individuals (here, newspaper commenters) re-use and reshape existing discourses of race and racism. As a post-racial practice embedded in racist history yet presented as frivolous entertainment, Blackface is particularly productive of debates about the "social signification of race" (Winant 1998, 756) – that is, the way individuals make sense of race but also use it to make sense of events or practices. This level of analysis is inextricably intertwined with the structural elements through which race permeate the cogs of society. This study therefore explores users' comments in light of larger structures and existing discourses by exploring (i) which meanings users give to "race" and "racism" when commenting on French and US newspaper articles about Griezmann's Blackface and (ii) how these meanings differ and/or mirror existing discourses about race and racism.

Race and racism in France and the United States

Notwithstanding similarities across European countries regarding the absence of "race" from public discourses (Goldberg 2006), it is central to understand how the removal of this category has been justified in the French context. Discourses of race and racism in France are tied to the ideals of republicanism outlined during the 1789 Revolution and still shaping today's society. The republican framework is driven by an egalitarian motto arguing that individuals should be equal regardless of differences (Amiraux and Simon 2006). To

fulfil this idea, differences of all kind (linguistic, religious, gender, sexual, regional, ethnic etc.) are intentionally overlooked at the State level so that the only category through which individuals are recognized and to which they identify is the overarching and all-encompassing national identity: French (Fila-Bakabadio 2011; Salem and Thompson 2016).

Pitfalls of this system have nevertheless been pointed out. Rather than being category-free, the republican framework system has been labelled colour-blind (Jugé and Perez 2006). These accusations draw on instances of the system implicitly perpetuating norms of the majority as norms of the society (e.g. Bhandar 2009). The supposedly neutral and encompassing label "French" therefore becomes limited to the invisible majority. Meanwhile, individuals claiming their differences are accused of *communautarianism* and of supporting *multiculturalism*. These two notions have strong negative connotations in French public discourse, in part because of their Anglo-Saxon resonance, and because of the threat they are perceived to pose to national cohesion (Montague 2013). The power struggles that underpin discourses of race and racism within the French republican system are also related to France's colonial past. Both issues are sensitive, taboo-like, and connected with national representations as well as the construction of racialized others as challenging the republican principle of universalism (Mbembe 2005).

In spite of a specific historical route, discourses of race and racism in France resemble those circulating in neighbouring countries. In the wake of the atrocities committed in the name of "race" during the Holocaust, that term has been dismissed from most European discourses but ended up being replaced by cultural and religious markers. National European identities have therefore become signifiers of White and Christianity (Essed and Trienekens 2008; Sommier 2018). Scholars have explained the logics of *cultural* racism as it operates in Europe, namely its connections to national imagined communities (Wren 2001) and the de-politicization of culture (Lentin 2004) that makes it possible to talk about "inter-cultural *difference*" rather than "inter-racial *inequality*" (Taguieff 1989, 77).

Bonilla-Silva (2010) outlines similar logics about cultural racism as one of the mechanisms through which *colour-blind* racism is perpetuated in the United States. In this context, overt expressions of racism are dismissed from public discourses, creating the illusion of a post-racial society. Different discursive strategies but similar hierarchical relations are nevertheless maintained: "Instead of relying on name-calling (niggers, Spics, Chinks), colour-blind racism otherizes softly ("these people are humans too")" (Bonilla-Silva 2010, 3). Despite comparable trends in Europe and the United States towards seemingly post-racial societies, important differences subsist between both contexts. One key difference pertains to race being a taboo and even a forbidden term in official texts in some European countries, while it remains an acceptable notion in the United States as long as it is unproblematized. Thus, as Wayne (2017, 106) explains about the US:

postracial colour-blind thinking is less literal refusals to see race than it is beliefs forwarding the notion that race ultimately does not matter. As such, in public discourse and popular media, race must be present but contained in contexts that deny it any political or historical weight.

Contemporary differences between the US and Europe are largely explained by the historical events that have shaped their respective racial structures. Blackface echoes the historical trajectories of France and the US as it draws on hierarchy between Blacks and Whites developed during slavery (the US and France) as well as colonialism (France). Blackface is a minstrel practice that was well established in the nineteenth century, and which, as humour can powerfully do, sustained racist representations (Lott 2013). The grossly distorted representations of Black slaves by White comedians played a significant role in shaping representations of Blackness in White imaginaries in the US but also in France (e.g. Pettersen 2016). Although widely recognized as a racist practice in the US today, instances of Blackface still occur and can fuel intense polemics. Less controversial outside of the US (see e.g. Sharpe and Hynes 2016 about Australia or De Beukelaer 2017 about the Netherlands), Blackface is not prominently discussed in France and is therefore similar to other colonial practices that have been dismissed from the French collective memory.

Method

This study explores users' comments on both French and US newspaper articles about Blackface. Although this does not automatically mean that users were from these countries, linguistic cues of national belonging in the data indicated that most users identified either as French or US nationals. A total of 887 user comments were retrieved from two French and US newspapers (see Table 1). Not many newspapers (especially from the US) had a comment section, which had a direct bearing on the data collection. As Hughey and Daniels (2013, 333) point out, hopes of the Internet being a "democratic digital utopia" have long vanished and many online media have closed or decided to vigorously moderate users' comments. Nevertheless, previous studies on and about online comments (e.g. Hughey 2012; Hughey and Daniels 2013) have underlined the importance of investigating

Table 1. Overview of the dataset.

Country	Newspaper title	Genre	Number of comments	
US	*Washington Post*	Newspaper of record	4	542
	TMZ	Tabloid news website	538	
France	*Le Monde*	Newspaper of record	266	298
	Le Parisien	Popular regional (Paris region) newspaper	32	
TOTAL				887

these spaces to understand how users reproduce and reshape offline expressions of racism online. Most of the comments originated from two newspapers (*TMZ* and *Le Monde*) but collecting data from all four newspapers strengthened the study by providing insights into other users' comments as well as other articles. The limited sources from which data come did not affect the aim of this study to investigate in-depth how users talked about race and racism. Differences between the source genres were however considered to keep in mind the possible bearing on their readership and on the nature of the comments posted.

The data were initially carefully checked by the researcher to monitor users' levels of activity and dismiss comments from trolls. Although no such case was identified in the data, the possibility remains. However, this does not compromise the relevance of the data since users ignored whether their interlocutors were genuine, and their comments were therefore de facto incorporated into the broader discussion.

A thematic analysis was conducted using a three-legged approach (Boeije 2010). The first step (i.e. open coding) resulted in 27 categories which were re-articulated and combined in the second phase of the analysis (i.e. axial coding) to move to a higher level of abstraction. Finally, in the third phase (i.e. selective coding), overarching themes were identified by the researcher based on the previous coding phases, memos written throughout the analysis, theoretical insights, and a constant back and forth between these elements and the data. This iterative process was crucial to give this study enough theoretical depth while staying true to the meanings constructed in the data. Online expressions of racism can be difficult to identify and examine because they are diverse, ranging from blatant to covert expressions, can be platform-specific, and are constantly evolving (Sharma and Brooker 2016). This study therefore paid attention to the *context* in which the newspaper comments were posted to evaluate them in light of general discourses circulating in France and the US as well as narratives about this particular polemic (Hughey and Daniels 2013). Eventually, apprehending differences and similarities between users' comments in relation to immediate and larger contextual cues cast light on interesting meaning-making processes about the notions of race, racism, and political correctness. Namely, the analysis revealed users' strategies to deny accusations of racism by (i) reducing racism to an individual phenomenon, (ii) mobilizing national rhetoric about race, racism, and colour-blindness, and (iii) disqualifying anti-racist discourses as being politically "too" correct.

Overview of the newspaper discourses

Although the newspaper articles were not analysed in-depth, attention was paid to their content as it provided important information to contextualize

users' comments. Both *Le Monde* and *Le Parisien* published factual articles focusing on (i) the unfolding of the controversy on twitter, (i) what Blackface means and its history in the US, and (iii) how it resonates within the French context. Both articles included quotes from the Representative Council of (France's) Black Associations (CRAN) and experts on the topics of racism and/or Blackface. Both *TMZ* and the *Washington Post* articles were very brief (shorter than the French ones) and focussed on describing how the events unfolded. The main difference between the French and US articles had to do with the understanding of Blackface as a racist practice. The US articles built on the premise that Blackface *is* racist and explained events in that light (e.g. the extent to which this could jeopardize Griezmann's career, characterizing upset responses from Twitter users as obvious and expected). On the other hand, the French articles built on the premise that Blackface *can be understood* as a racist practice, which oriented their content towards explaining why, how, and by whom it can be perceived as such.

Racism reduced to an individual phenomenon

The vast majority of users commenting on all four newspapers (i.e. *Washington Post*, *TMZ*, *Le Parisien* and *Le Monde*) criticized the polemics about Griezmann's Blackface. By arguing that his costume was not racist, users provided insights into what they understood as racism. In that regard, comments revealed the emphasis placed on individual agency rather than structural issues. Users widely conceptualized racism as an isolated and individual practice that they associated with one's *personality* and linked to notion of *intent*. Many users therefore defended Griezmann against accusations of racism by referring to his personality and relationships with people of colour, as illustrated in the following quotes:

> (1) He's a natural, nice, easy-going looking guy, that people would accuse him of that is outrageous. (*Le Parisien*)[1]
> (2) Isn't Grizou's [Griezmann's nickname] best friend Pogba, and what is his skin colour? (*Le Parisien*)

The previous quote illustrates the presence in the data of cliché discourses that use one's connections to minority groups as a token of one's anti-racist stance (Bonilla-Silva 2015). Comments in which racism was reduced to the individual level focussed on Griezmann's personality and relationships, which indicated essentialist views of racism as something people *are* rather than *do*. This argument was used to dismiss Blackface as a racist practice and instead focus on the people involved by referring to their personality as well as motivation. Many users therefore argued that an act is racist only if it is meant to be, which, many users claimed, was not the case of Griezmann's Blackface. The notion of *intent* therefore played a pivotal role in

defining the boundaries of racism. The following quote illustrates how such justification was used to move the blame away from Griezmann, who, in users' words, did not mean to be racist, and onto others, who decided to judge his costume as racist:

> (3) I think people don't think about intent. Clearly, he wasn't intending to be a racist … he was intending to wear a cool costume. It really isn't fair to blindly ignore intent because you want to be offended. Just like that chick that dressed up as Crazy Eyes from OITNB [Orange is the New Black] a few years ago … she was dressing as a character she loved, and not trying to be racist. (*TMZ*)

As illustrated in the previous quote, both performance and perception of racism were defined through the lens of individual agency in the data. The construction of racism as performed and perceived on an individual basis decontextualized racism by disconnecting it from structure and history. Thus, most users' comments tended to understand racism through the lens of isolated events positioned outside of a given social reality. Discussing racism in the Netherlands and Europe, Essed and Hoving (2014, 7) point out the way "Dominant discourses *miss* historical explanations and *dismiss* the connection between present ethnic humiliations and the brutality of colonization, slavery, and antisemitism". Data from this study suggest US commenters used similar discursive strategies. Emphasizing individual agency rather than structural issues is particularly relevant to Blackface, a tradition that derives from, and can therefore powerfully signal, a country's colonial past and connection to slavery. However, on a very few occasions, the historical and structural dimensions of racism were brought forth by users explaining to others why Blackface, and this incident in particular, were criticized:

> (4) For those who have suffered from Parisian mocking because of their accent from Marseille, for those who have been teased for being a bit too big, too tall, or too short. For all of those who have a big nose, who have breasts smaller than a mosquito bite. For all the yellows, the blacks, the bolds, the frizzy-haired. This silly criticism about Blackface only shows one thing: our inability to accept our own differences that create the wonderful kaleidoscope of humankind. (*Le Monde*)
>
> (5) Slavery and segregation are not the same as mocking an accent from Marseille. That's what the article explains. Blackface has a racist foundation, not a humorous one. (*Le Monde*)

Similar interactions were also found in the US newspaper comments:

> (6) Why is this not OK when it was done in fun and not hate? Why is the movie White Chicks perfectly acceptable then? (*TMZ*)
>
> (7) Don't sell yourself short. People are racist against white folk for that very reason. But to the point, white face isn't offensive because it's historically never been used offensively. (*TMZ*)

The scarcity of such comments can be explained by the tendency for online news commenting spaces to be mostly White spaces. Studies have underlined the racial divide that characterizes many digital spaces, in part because individuals use the Internet to express their racial identities and belongings (e.g. Hughey 2008; Korn 2015). The overall Whiteness of the comments analysed in this study, and the combination of more or less overt expressions of racism, echoes Kettrey and Laster's (2014) findings about online White spaces emerging from the use of both colour-blindedness and blatant expressions of racism.

National undertones

In comments posted on *Le Monde* (not on *Le Parisien*) several users referred to national symbolic boundaries to condemn and reject the newspaper's US-centricity for covering Griezmann's Blackface:

> (8) That this is forbidden in the American culture is one thing. Artificially extending it to France which is far from having that heritage is an absurd attack on good faith. (*Le Monde*)

This echoes a few comments on the US newspapers arguing that Blackface, and racism, are not issues in Europe and in France (comments to which other users responded to point out that they were wrong):

> (9) Only you, tmz, would Posty this bs. When you go to France there is no black and white racism. They only hate Americans. Obviously this isn't racist. Is a costume. He isn't insensitive. Blacks weren't enslaved in Europe (*TMZ*)

Both previous comments from the US and French data are informed by and sustain representations that typically associate the US with issues of race and racism and disconnect France (and Europe) from it. Disconnecting France from racism denies and invalidates accusations of racism; and postpones any needs to engage with its consequences. Furthermore, reducing anti-racist discourses to US-centric narratives allows users to keep accusations of racism at distance and maintain positive representations of the French imagined community (Van Dijk 2002).

Users' comments also revealed national undertones by articulating dominant discourses circulating in France and in the US. For instance, some users posting on *Le Monde* and *Le Parisien* claimed that it was racist to label Griezmann's costume as an instance of racism:

> (10) Of course, there is no place for laughing at or being mean towards an ethnicity when it's meant to despise it. However, laughter is what should bring us together and not doing it because they are black and that we shouldn't laugh at them like we laugh at others … well that bothers me actually, it's acknowledging that they are different. And they are not. (*Le Parisien*)

This comment echoes colour-blind discourses circulating in France and drawing on universalist values of the Republic through which differences are overlooked to reach equality (Silverman 2012). The criticism of communitarianism specific to the French comments further illustrates the reproduction of dominant national discourses about race and racism in some of the users' comments:

> (11) I feel like individual freedom is so crushed by communitarianism. There's no more room for freewill. The public opinion inevitably anticipates the state of mind of the defendant … (*Le Monde*)

The embeddedness of users' comments in national contexts was also suggested by the vocabulary used. In the French data, comments referred to "ethnicity" and "skin colour", although in a limited manner, but never to the actual word "race". The tendency to avoid references to differences that could be construed as *racial* differences was especially visible in comments referring to cultural and linguistic differences; revealing that processes of in- and exclusion in France typically draw on "language of cultural differences […] far more than the overtly racist language of racial superiority and inferiority based on biological differences" (Silverman 2012, 45). In contrast, the US data contained many comments using the word "race". These differences could illustrate the extent to which users' comments were embedded in national discursive practices where "race" is a taboo (France) or remains in use (US).

In addition, a few comments posted on the US newspapers addressed race as a biological notion, several conveyed explicit and overt racism, and a few used (variations of) the term "negro". Differences between colour-blind and overt expressions of racism could be related to the newspapers genres that tend to attract readers with rather high (*Le Monde*) and low (*TMZ*) cultural capital. Users with higher cultural capitals may be more familiar with the discursive strategies that enable them to conceal race and racism. The presence of overt and aggressive expressions of racism in the data also echoes previous studies indicating that online spaces are venues for blatant expressions of racism (e.g. Cisneros and Nakayama 2015).

Users' comments across the data reproduced colour-blind ideology to dismiss racism, with small but important nuances. US users expressed "post-racial" views of racism by arguing that it was something of the past:

> (12) Who cares about Blackface in the 1930s … all those people are dead and you're not a racist just because you wear a costume. (*TMZ*)

> (13) Seriously, how does this invoke feelings of racism when everyone from the time period this occurred are long dead? Nobody alive today experienced Blackface theater. If you see that and your mind jumps to racist thoughts it says more about how you think than this soccer player. Why not let it die instead of passing on racism? (*TMZ*)

In contrast, French users expressed colour-blind views by dismissing racism altogether and claiming that it only happens elsewhere, for instance in the US. Both types of comments therefore followed logics stemming from different historical and structural understandings of racism. As Salem and Thompson (2016, 14) indeed point out:

> Whereas the 'post-race' discourse of the US suggests that race is overcome but acknowledges the long history of race as a category of exclusion and oppression, the 'postrace' discourse in countries like Germany, France and the Netherlands becomes a sort of 'pre-race' discourse in which race is perceived as an isolated incident and not as a continuous factor in the workings of society.

These two different understandings of race were present in the data and contributed to support colour-blind racism by arguing that racism is not a problem today; either because it is not an issue that concerns us *anymore* or because it does not concern us *at all*.

Whiteness and criticisms of political correctness

Users commenting on the French and US newspapers widely addressed political correctness (and its increase in recent years) as the main problem and reason for this controversy. Political correctness was harshly criticized for being a form of (14) "worrying intellectual terrorism" (*Le Monde*) or (15) "totalitarian narrow-mindedness" (*Le Monde*). Overall, many users shared their (16) "relief to see the kind of reactions posted on the forum. Political correctness is spinning out of control" (*Le Monde*). The salience of comments criticizing political correctness echoed the discursive strategies identified by Hughey and Daniels (2013) as they examined ways in which newspaper commenters dismissed racism. The authors argued that:

> This defense occurs in three ways: (1) abstract arguments that invoke the individual's right to engage in 'free speech,' (2) accusations of victimhood that appeal to 'political correctness,' and (3) seemingly matter-of-fact statements that are based on implicit racial stereotypes and myths. (Hughey and Daniels 2013, 338)

Users' frontal attacks against political correctness revealed the connection between denials of racism as well as discourses of racism such as *smug ignorance* (i.e. the uninterested and complacent attitude regarding one's lack of knowledge of racism) (Essed and Hoving 2014), and *entitlement racism* (i.e. the idea that freedom of expression takes precedence over respect towards others) (Essed and Muhr 2018). Several users from *Le Parisien* and *Le Monde* pointed out their – and Griezmann's assumed – ignorance of Blackface. Such argument was absent from comments on the US newspapers, which can be explained by the salience of Blackface in the US context.

(17) I understand very well the reference, but it cannot make any sense to any White person born 30 years ago or even before, so it makes no sense to call them racist either. That's taking it too far. (*Le Parisien*)

This comment reveals two intertwined strategies to dismiss racism: arguing that Blackface is unknown *in France* and to *White* people. The first argument hints at the republican and universalist framework under which race and racism are hardly mentioned in public discourses. Moreover, it suggests the strength with which France's colonial and slavery past, and Blackface practices have been dismissed in dominant discourses. The second argument put forward suggests the weight of knowing about racist practices lies solely with minorities. In particular, it reveals the unidirectional way in which racism occurs and shows "how republicanism expresses its power to delegitimize discrimination termed 'racial' by disqualifying 'race'" (Keaton 2010, 105). Thus, the arguments deployed in the previous quote are embedded in *Whiteness*. That is, the privilege of White people to be a-racial and invisible while at the same time being the norm against which other groups are racialized, evaluated, and treated (Bonilla-Silva 2012; Jugé and Perez 2006). Users therefore relied on "smug ignorance" (Essed and Hoving 2014, 24) by not only rejecting accusations of racism but dismissing the possibility to even know what constitutes racism. Ignorance as a defense mechanism also appeared as users made claims regarding the *authenticity* of Griezmann's costume. Arguments about authenticity typically referred to the large proportion of Black players in the Harlem Globe trotter and in basketball in general, but also to visual depictions of Black people:

(18) There's nothing shocking in this picture, he dressed up as a Harlem Globe trotter, they were all Black in that team!! (*Le Monde*)
(19) how ELSE are you supposed to dress up like a Black Guy?? (*TMZ*)

These comments reveal general misrepresentations of Blackness as well as the lasting influence of Blackface performances on collective White imaginaries (Lott 2013). At the core of Blackface is the objectification of Black bodies by White people and for White people's entertainment. However, users' comments dismissed this inherent struggle by disconnecting Blackface from issues of race and racism, and instead limiting it to an innocent humorous practice (see Van Der Pijl and Goulordava 2014). Limiting Blackface to entertainment (gone wrong) fails to address the deep political ramifications of race and racism that it embodies. Blackface is presented as decoupled from politics and historical systems of oppression such as colonialism or slavery, while precisely drawing on practices and discourses of these times. The way Blackface simultaneously symbolizes racism and its denial can help understand the tensions it crystallizes and reasons why it is a repeated, and mediatized, source of discursive struggles.

In addition to dismissing accusations of racism, users also actively condemned the limits imposed on free speech and individual freedom. In that regard, however, freedom was often reduced to that of White people. The following comment resembles many others from the data about the way political correctness prevents "us" from dressing up like "them" – therefore positioning "us" as victims of political correctness:

> (20) I don't understand the polemic. Does this mean we cannot dress up as Indians, Asians, Hindus and Eskimos? I understand that dressing up as a particular ethnicity to ridicule and humiliate it can be considered racist, but I don't see how dressing up as a Black basketball player should be considered racist … (*Le Monde*).

Bringing forth ethnic minorities as examples of potential costumes hints at another discursive strategy mentioned by Hughey and Daniels (2013, 338) which consists of using "seemingly matter-of-fact statements that are based on implicit racial stereotypes and myths". Comments deploying these discursive strategies exemplify Whiteness. That is, the privilege to treat race as unproblematic while contributing to and benefiting from the racial order that positions Whites on top. The idea that *we* are victims of political correctness was reinforced by comments about the perceived double standard that prevents Whites from dressing up as Blacks, but allows Blacks to dress up as Whites:

> (21) Why is this not ok when the Wayans brothers can make a feature film dressed as white women? Oh, that's right. DOUBLE STANDARD. (*TMZ*)

The movie White Chicks was vastly used as an example of double standard alongside references ranging from Michael Jackson to Black women straightening their hair. These examples were used to support the idea of reverse racism. The criticism of political correctness for jeopardizing White privilege and turning the majority into victims illustrate dynamics at play in the construction of *predatory identities* (Appadurai 2006). The construction of the White (trans)national majority as vulnerable and under attack also gave room to discourses of *entitlement racism* (Essed and Muhr 2018). Overall, political correctness was widely presented as *limiting* freedom of the majority rather than *enabling* that of minorities, an argument onto which users drew to enhance feelings of victimization as well as the legitimacy to express themselves even if it offends. This perception of political correctness was intertwined with other elements present in the comments and discussed thus far: racism as isolated events disconnected from structural issues and related to intent, authenticity, and individuals' personalities. In particular, the decoupling of racism from historical and societal structures may explain many of the arguments against political correctness. That is, users seemed to understand political correctness as a discourse which generalizes racism to everything, as opposed to a discourse which addresses events in light of

structural and historical systems of oppression. All of these discursive strategies put together also contributed to turn the news commenting spaces examined for this study into White spaces where users could express their sense of victimization (Hughey and Daniels 2013).

Criticisms of political correctness were intertwined with criticisms of entities perceived to embody and enforce political correctness in society: traditional media, leftists, intellectuals, anti-racist associations. These entities were consistently targeted in US and French comments although intellectuals were more systematically targeted in the French data. This could be due to the content of the articles from *Le Monde* and *Le Parisien* which both included excerpts from scholars explaining the racist foundations and resonance of Blackface. Another feature specific to the French data was the argument that Griezmann was an easy target. The status of Griezmann as a football player was contrasted with individuals from intellectual and political elites who were perceived to escape criticisms because of their social position.

> (22) How a fair and current cause is perverted by a handful of Torquemada [Tomás de Torquemada, inquisitor general during the Spanish Inquisition] who impose a worrying intellectual terrorism (see the Tex-gate [TV presenter] for political correctness) … Anti-racism in France is touching bottom. And I'm not sure we're done, screw-ups have no limits … All the Finkelkraut [intellectual] and Zemmour [journalist] are on cloud nine, and they have good reasons to be, unfortunately! Joining anti-racist associations … sad times! (*Le Monde*)

This quote illustrates the perceived divide between popular figures such as Griezmann and TV presenter Tex who have been accused of racism, and intellectual elites such as Finkelkraut and Zemmour who have not. Griezmann was defended more vehemently in the comments posted on the French newspapers and in which he was sometimes heralded as a popular icon in opposition to figures associated with political correctness. This class opposition also appeared in some comments on the US newspapers through criticisms targeted at the media for creating a political correctness bubble that users wanted to burst. The opposition between online users and professional media was therefore translated into an opposition between people and elite. The intersection between racism and class was most prominent in the French comments as some users argued that discourses of political correctness did not draw the line between non-racists and racists, but between social classes. Users suggested that one's social class matters more than one's actions to be regarded and condemned as racist in public discourses. The example of Ted, the presenter of a popular TV show fired for his joke about domestic violence, was mentioned in several comments. This contributed to underline the class division felt by some users and exposed the tensions associated with the representation of lower classes as White, in contrast with middles classes and elites that more typically embody Whiteness

(Bonnett 1998). The intersection of class and racism highlighted further the loss of power conveyed by some of the users who seemed to perceive White privilege to subsist for intellectual and political elites but not for lower-class individuals (as well as those who represent them like Ted and Griezmann). These online commentaries therefore revealed the complexity and intersectionality that define social and racial positions as users expressed their domination *of* racialized groups as well as domination *by* higher social classes (Levine-Rasky 2011).

Conclusion

Examining comments on French and US articles about Griezmann's Blackface in December 2017 revealed widely similar understandings of racism among users from both countries. As snippets of conversation, newspaper comments provide insights into the way individuals reproduce and reshape existing expressions of racism at particular moments in time and in relation to specific topics. Specifically, the findings shed light on three main strategies used to defend Griezmann and deny accusations of racism: (i) reducing racism to an individual phenomenon, (ii) mobilizing colour-blind discourses embedded in national representations of race as either an issue of the past (US) or a topic not to be talked about (France), and (iii) disqualifying anti-racist discourses as politically correct.

By explaining racism as an individual phenomenon, users disconnected Blackface from the historical systems of oppression that enabled it in the first place. The findings therefore draw attention to the tensions that permeate Blackface as a phenomenon signifying the historical ramifications of contemporary discourses of racism, while being defended through the dismissal of these same historical, structural, and political connections. In addition to rejecting accusations of racism, users widely criticized political correctness for limiting White people's freedom while enabling that of minorities. Political correctness was vastly criticized as a discourse that sees racism everywhere, as opposed to users' views of racism as isolated events. Furthermore, the criticism of political correctness indicated intersections between discourses of racism, race and class (particularly in the French data), and exposed the struggles of lower classes to be represented as White, in contrast with elites whom users perceived to maintain their White privilege. The findings therefore revealed the perceived loss of power from users and the associated emergence of discourses of *entitlement racism* (Essed and Muhr 2018). Users' claims of ignorance about racist practices in general and Blackface, in particular, were also used to refute accusations of racism against Griezmann and White people in general. Such expressions of *smug ignorance* (Essed and Hoving 2014) placed the weight of identifying and living with racist practices solely on minorities. Thus, overall, the findings indicated the convergence of offline

discourses of racism such as *entitlement racism* and *smug ignorance* with online discursive strategies such as shifting focus from race onto free speech (Hughey and Daniels 2013) or translating the opposition between online users and professional media into an opposition between people and elite. This study, therefore, contributes to the growing body of research on online expressions of race and racism that sets out to understand the way offline and online discourses overlap, diverge, and can be mutually constructive (Sommier, van Sterkenburg, and Hofhuis 2019; Titley 2014).

Differences and similarities among users' comments highlight the need to conduct research on race and racism that goes beyond national boundaries. Going past methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Schiller 2002) does not mean dismissing the structural and historical shaping of race and racism, but rather acknowledging, as Essed and Trienekens (2008, 63) point out, that "we are all interconnected in global constellations of racial and cultural hierarchies, which are regionally and locally shaped". What "regional" and "local" stands for should not a-priori be reduced to national scales. In particular, the intersection between race and class opens avenues for future research to explore discourses of race and racisms among different types of various imagined communities.

Note

1. Comments published in French were translated by the author. For transparency, Appendix includes their original version. Quotations included in the finding section are followed by the name of the newspaper on which users posted. Users' pseudonyms were removed from the article to protect their anonymity as much possible.

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Appendix: Original quotes in French

(1) Ce type est naturel, gentil en apparent il casse la tête à personne, qu'on lui reproche ça c'est scandaleux. (*Le Parisien*)

(2) Le meilleur ami de Grizou n'est ce pas Pogba et la couleur de peau de ce dernier? (*Le Parisien*)

(4) Pour ceux qui ont subi les moqueries parisiennes pour un accent de Marseille, pour tous ceux qui sont raillés pour être trop gros, trop grands, trop petits. Pour tous ceux qui ont un gros nez, celles qui ont des seins plus petits qu'une piqure de moustique. Pour tous les jaunes, les noirs, les chauves, les crépus. Cette critique crétine du Blackface ne montre qu'une chose: notre incapacité à assumer nos propres différences dans le merveilleux kaléidoscope du genre humain. (*Le Monde*)

(5) L'esclavage et la segregation, ce n'est pas pareil que de se moquer d'un accent marseillais. C'est ce qu'explique l'article. La Blackface a un fondement raciste, pas humoristique (*Le Monde*)

(8) Que cet interdit caracterise la culture americaine est une chose. l'étendre artificiellement à la France qui est loin d'avoir cet héritage est une absurde violence faite à la bonne foi. (*Le Monde*)

(10) Bien sur que la moquerie comme la mechancete n'ont pas leur place quand il s'agit de viser et de mepriser une ethnie mais le rire est pourtant ce qui devrait tous nous rassembler. Justement ne pas le faire sous pretexte qu'ils

sont noirs et qu'on ne doit pas rire d'eux comme des autres..me gene en fait, c'est reconnaitre qu'ils sont differents. Or ce n'est pas le cas: (*Le Parisien*)

(11) Je crois que les libertés individuelles sont tellement broyées par celles des communautarismes. Il n'y a plus de place au libre arbitre. La place publique préjuge forcément de l'état d'esprit de l'accusé … (*Le Monde*)

(14) terrorisme intellectuel inquiétant (*Le Monde*)

(15) la bien-pensance totalitaire (*Le Monde*)

(16) Comme beaucoup, je suis soulagé des réactions sur le forum. Le politiquement correct part en vrille … (*Le Monde*)

(17) Je comprends très bien la référence, mais qui ne peut pas parler à des blancs nés il y a peine 30 ans voire plus et donc de les taxer de racistes, c'est abuser. (*Le Parisien*)

(18) rien ne me choque dans cette photo, il s est déguisé en Harlem Globe trotter, ils étaient tous noirs dans l équipe!! (*Le Monde*)

(20) Je ne comprends pas la polémique. Cela veut-il dire qu'on ne doit se déguiser en indien, en asiatique, en hindou, en eskimo? Je comprends que le fait de se déguiser en une ethnie particulière et la tournée en ridicule de manière humiliante puisse être considérée comme raciste, mais je ne vois pas en quoi se déguiser en basketteur noir devrait être considéré comme raciste … (*Le Monde*).

(22) comment une cause juste et actuelle est dévoyée par une petite poignée de Torquemada qui imposent un terrorisme intellectuel inquiétant (voir l'affaire Tex pour le politiquement correct).. L'anti racisme en France touche le fond. Et je ne suis pas sûr qu'on ait fini, la connerie n'ayant pas de limites … . les Finkelkraut et Zemmour boivent du petit lait et peuvent à juste titre- hélas!- rallier les associations anti racistes … triste époque! (*Le Monde*)