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Demands, displays, and dreams of "Black joy" during times of crisis

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ABSTRACT
Based on collaborative research and reflections on media depictions, marketplace experiences, and Black life in Belgium and Britain, this article embraces Black joy, while critiquing societal demands and (re)presentations of it. Informed by scholarship on racialised emotions, Black interiority, and Black emotional epistemologies, we analyse how the idea of "Black joy" has been (re)presented in media in ways connected to racialised, classed, and national discourses of "we-ness" during the coronavirus (Covid-19) crisis. By analysing public (re)presentations of Black people, we critically consider how "Black joy" becomes "Black Joy^TM" – a defanged expression, enabling brand advertising by tapping into the racial and capitalist politics of marketable and mediated Black emotions and intimacy. We ask, "when, how, and why are the everyday emotions and experiences of Black people (re)presented by contemporary marketplace institutions as joyful?". Consequently, we theorise the relationship between Black joy, crises, and forms of Belgian and British advertising and media.

Introduction: what is this "Black joy"?

Black joy is a popularised expression of forms of joy nurtured and relationally felt by and between Black people, reflecting the "power to restrict access to their [our] spirits, emotions, and the source of their [our] joy" (Nichols 2023). It is the many and layered moments that involve Black people "Choosing Joy and Refusing to Shrink" (Stringfield 2022, 7). "It is a well-spring of power that is uplifting, and life-affirming" (Nichols 2023) – Black joy is immutable. Recognising Black joy does not deny the pervasiveness of antiblackness.

Rather, Black joy finds root and flourishes, despite such oppression (Harris Combs 2023). Much like other expressions from Black culture and movements (e.g. "Black is Beautiful"), the expression Black joy has piqued the interest of institutions seeking to promote their products and services, begging the questions: (1) How has Black joy been invoked as part of present-day media and public (re)presentations of Black people?, and (2) What do invocations of Black joy reveal about the politics of racialised emotions and their marketisation? Black joy is the topic of an expanding range of scholarship but there is a dearth of research on it in Belgium and Britain. Addressing this and contributing to this Special Issue on "the political representation of minoritized groups in politics, news media, and online" (Walter and Glas 2024), we analyse the mediated politics and (re)presentation of Black joy amid times of crises, while also reflecting on the everyday nature of forms of it.

Opening with an outline of our engagement with writing on Black joy, we shed light on its interiority – Black joy as *felt*, not simply (re)presented or externally expressed. Drawing on the words of Alexander (2004) on *the black interior*, we reflect on Black joy in relation to, but also beyond, times of crisis and the ways that "black people in the mainstream imaginary exist as fixed properties … " (5). We also turn to Hall's (1993) crucial work on "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?", to explore how aspects of contemporary popular culture contend with different definitions, or at least, *(re)presentations*, of Black joy (including Black interiority and intimacy) as a consumable state of being and an atmosphere to be advertised. Inspired by Hall's (1993, 104) provocation, "What sort of moment is this in which to pose the question of black popular culture?", we ask: what sort of moment is this in which to pose and respond to the question of Black Joy? As Hall (1993, 104) contended, "[t]hese moments are always conjunctural. They have their historical specificity; and although they always exhibit similarities and continuities with the other moments in which we pose a question like this, they are never the same moment". To articulate the historical specificity and politics of our current times, we reflect on "Black life, crisis, and Covid-19". We do so while affirming that crises are about much more than a single moment (Ibrahim and Ahad 2022) and politics are about much more than simply governmental activity, news media, or purportedly democratic processes.

In consumer culture, where brands' cultivation of "diversity capital" (Banks 2022, 1) and "corporate punditry" (Johnson 2022, xiii) on Black Lives Matter (BLM) and anti-racism is rife, Black joy is (re)framed as an ambience to be cultivated, a buyable balm, or a proposition by the philanthropy industrial complex. Reflecting on corporate responses to BLM, following the murder of George Floyd by a police officer in the US – Yee, nelson, and pulley (2023) critique "questionable moves of allyship being presented by corporate entities, capitalistic industries utilizing taglines such as 'Black Joy' for

commercial profit and the overall anti-racial fervor that ignited non-BIPOC [non-Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour] individuals that summer of 2020 now debatably apathetic". To unpack the entanglements of media, (re)presentations of Black joy, racial and capitalist politics, and crises, our analysis draws on work on "joy and angst" and Black emotional epistemologies, as well as insights on "visibility and/in the marketplace". This includes engaging with research on race, advertising, and aesthetics (Thomas, Johnson, and Grier 2023), Johnson's (2022, x) critique of "gestural anti-racism" exhibited by corporations, and Bonilla-Silva's (2019, 1) work on "racialized emotions – the emotions specific to racialized societies".

Our article also accounts for the impact of the "elite capture" of identity politics (Táíwò 2022), as well as "racialized discourses of belonging and geographies of exclusion" (Harrison 2013, 315), which shape media and marketplace (re)presentations of life – Black, and otherwise. Furthermore, our article is informed by Ibrahim and Ahad's (2022, 1) poignant work on "Black temporality of crisis" – "an analytical framework that uncovers how history is constituted through experiences that often escape the brush of serious historical consideration, in addition to clearly discernible and momentous events". Hence, although we focus on Black joy during the Covid-19 pandemic, we also recognise the simultaneous societal crisis and mundane normalisation of antiblackness and capitalism prior to, and, beyond it. Yet, we do not suggest that Black life is defined by a state of crisis. We affirm that the many grooves, textures, and tenors of Black interiority, intimacy, and life exceed anything that the concept of crisis could ever convey, but this does not detract from the fact that crises impact Black people.

While we acknowledge that governmental electoral campaigns and news media can indicate much about politics and the experiences of structurally marginalised groups, it is also important to focus on the broader landscape of media (re)presentations. This includes forms of popular culture (Hall 1993) and marketing (Rosa-Salas and Sobande 2022; Thomas, Johnson, and Grier 2023) which reveal much about politics, crises, and everyday emotions. As the editors of this Special Issue acknowledge, "crises responses such as the one to the Covid-19 pandemic create the need for collective unity, a feeling of 'we-ness'" (Walter and Glas 2024). Such a perceived "we-ness" and the politics that propel it can be racialised in ways that manifest in media, marketing, and popular culture messages that are intended to speak to/of specific demographics' experiences and emotions. Cue invocations of Black joy (e.g. via advertising take-overs/campaigns by Bumble, Cadbury, Channel 4, the National Railway Company of Belgium, and Sainsbury's). Using a bricolage methodology, which we detail later in this article, we study examples to analyse Belgian and British (re)presentations of Black joy during times of crisis, before our concluding reflections on the (dis)connections of Black intimacy, interiority, and marketplace inclusion.

Theoretical framework

We locate the meaningfulness of Black joy as always lying beyond capitalism's capture – in forms of Black being, sensing, knowing, dream work (Jones 2022; 2023) and interiority (Alexander 2004) which are felt in ways that are not visible, tangible, or fully legible to the marketplace and conventions of academia. Our own experiences of Black dreaming and joy include the different ways we have come together as Black people in Belgium and Britain, sharing our hopes for Black futures (t)here, while learning about the histories and everyday politics and pulses of the places that we live(d) in. As Miles (2022) states in "Sociology of Vibe", an insightful piece that intricately addresses the relationship between blackness, emotion, and epistemology, "[a]ll Black people are theorists. Having to continuously contend with society's renewed investments in anti-Blackness, Black people have developed important modes of making sense of the world" (366). Expanding on that point, Miles (2022) affirms that "[i]t is often through the social nature of emotions that our bodies are first made aware of the bodily, social, and material implications of social structures" (2022). Correspondingly, our theoretical framework includes a focus on notions and experiences of Black joy beyond emotional binaries, including by making connections between Black emotions and material and structural realities.

Black joy beyond emotional binaries

In recent years, Black joy has garnered increased attention among Black communities across the Western hemisphere, including in Belgium (Amponsah 2021, 2023a) and Britain (Brinkhurst-Cuff and Sotire 2021). As a concept, movement, and aesthetic, Black joy is generally understood as a feeling, practice, and overall state of being that combats prevalent unidimensional (re)presentations of Black life and the ubiquitous focus on the pain and struggles that Black people face. Black joy is embodied, effervescent, and experienced in myriad ways (Kihoro Mackay 2021; Lu and Steele 2019). It is the comfort of kinships, the beauty of enduring love, the sharing of ancestral knowledge, and the heartening feeling of home(s). While relationships are central to how Black joy is found and felt, many media and marketing messages about Black joy situate it as a sensorial experience that can be pursued through individualistic consumer choices, including to self-soothe when faced with crises. Therefore, drawing on Johnson's (2022) critical account of corporatised gestural anti-racism, and informed by research on "The Marketability of Black Joy" (Drake 2019), we turn our attention to (re)presentations of Black joy in Britain and Belgium.

Our analysis of such matters is also informed by Yao's (2021, 4) work on the structural and racial politics of (un)feeling, including its critical account of the ways that "one must be recognized *as* sympathetic to be deserving of

sympathy from those with the agency to sympathize. Thus, the marginalized do not have the luxury of being unsympathetic without forfeiting the provisional acceptance of their capacity for affective expression and, therefore, the conditional acceptance of their humanity". Additionally, as is outlined in Emejulu's work (2022), "people of colour, and Black people in particular, face serious social sanction and real physical harm if we publicly emote in ways that violate dominant feeling rules", including when (un)expressing emotions that are at odds with rhetoric and (re)presentations pushed by institutions and society. Therefore, we reflect on what perceived *displays* of Black joy in media and the marketplace may suggest and, even, *demand* of Black people.

While some notions of Black joy suggest that it allows Black people to take a break from politicised lives, other ideas of it extol the political, liberatory, and plainly fun virtues of Black joy. Typically, mainstream media messaging on Black joy focuses on variations of the idea that expressions of Black joy are a form of resistance in anti-Black contexts. However, we echo assertions that the idea of Black joy is not inherently radical. "In fact, without a sense of materiality, Black joy becomes directionless and easy to co-opt by the varied forces of power that are fueled by anti-Blackness" (Bastién 2023). That said, we emphasise that Black joy is far from being a mere response to antiblackness or a marketable mood used to advertise brands. In doing so, we also affirm that the *potential* for expressions of Black joy to reflect radical forms of collectiveness, ingenuity, and love (Stringfield 2022), should not be diminished by perceiving Black joy via simplistic binaries (e.g. resistant versus passive or political versus apolitical).

Indeed, in contrast with "whiteness as racialized privilege" (Harris 1993, 1707), in Britain, Belgium, and beyond, blackness is structurally oppressed. In such contexts, the concerns, angst, emotions, and mental health and wellbeing of Black people are often stigmatised, if not outright pathologised and policed (Linton and Walcott 2022; Omonira-Oyekanmi 2014). The ongoing impacts of colonialism and white supremacy shape present-day power dynamics in ways that are profoundly spatialised, from uneven access to resources across neighbourhoods, to mass incarceration and the inordinate impact of interconnected crises like environmental injustice and Covid-19 on Black people worldwide. At the same time, Black space- and worldmaking has involved marronage and movements; expressive culture; and more. This includes familial rituals, ways of storytelling and celebrating, intergenerational dream work, and artistic and healing practices that uplift the fullness of Black life (Jones 2022; 2023). Thus, despite its relatively newfound attention in Western consumer culture, Black joy is best understood as being part of a rich history and tapestry of Black cultures and "Black discursive space" (Kihoro Mackay 2021).

Black people in different parts of the world have historically experienced joy in countless and layered ways, "despite" or even through/with grief,

and certainly beyond Western binary notions of life (presence) versus death (absence). The expressive west-African mourning practices that take place amid the celebration of the lives rather than deaths of loved ones during funeral/memorial events, is only one example. Black joy's many qualities include those often identified by community organisers, authors, artists, and scholars as subversive, because Black joy actively works against common expectations of Black life (and death) in anti-Black societies (Lu and Steele 2019). The idea is that we cultivate and dwell in joy not simply to fight or cope with oppression by experiencing *and* displaying joyous moments. Rather, Black people find ways to nurture and sustain forms of joy *despite* the pervasiveness of such oppression. The same logic lies at the root of conceptualisations of other seemingly ordinary practices and racialised emotions, including Black love, that counter popular representations of Black (love) lives as existing in a state of conflict and crisis. We affirm these perspectives, while exploring Black joy in a way that challenges societal binary notions of so-called positive versus negative emotions (e.g. joy versus angst and grief) and binary notions of so-called times of normality versus crisis (Sobande 2022; Sobande and hill 2022).

Black life, crisis, and COVID-19

In Belgium and Britain, where our research is located – reflecting our experiences of living in these places (one of us in Belgium for 7 years and the other in Britain for 32) – the crises that Black people face include ongoing racism, and, specifically, *antiblackness*, which, in many contexts, is also embedded in so-called "normal" everyday life. For example, a study of "racism and ethnic inequality in a time of crisis" noted that in the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic in Britain, a high prevalence of assault was reported by people who identify as "Black Caribbean", "Mixed White[1] and Black African", and people from the "Any Other Black group" and "White and Black Caribbean groups" (Ellingworth et al. 2023). The study also indicated that "[c]lose to a third of ethnic minority people reported experiencing racial discrimination in education, with a similar proportion reporting racial discrimination in employment" (ibid.). A survey commissioned by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2023) signalled that nearly 50 per cent of people of African descent who responded to their survey have been discriminated against. Such research points out anti-Black racism in Europe, including when highlighting Belgium as being among the European countries with the highest prevalence of housing-related racial discrimination (44 per cent of respondents) and the highest prevalence of Black people being stopped by police on the street (41 per cent) (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2023).

In both Britain and Belgium, racist, xenophobic, and Islamophobic claims about the hygiene, values, and knowledge of Black, Brown, and Asian

people there, particularly Muslims, circulated as part of discourse that denied the realities of antiblackness, medical racism, and Islamophobia, while attributing Black, Brown, and Asian people's Covid infections to the outcome of personal choices rather than structural forces. At the same time, across Europe there was "a resurgence of nationalism, racism, and anti-migrant sentiments" (Walter and Glas 2024). Our article accounts for such particularities of the Covid-19 crisis, the longer history of how Black people have been framed as a crisis, and the interconnections of both. The Covid-19 pandemic is a time when multiple entangled crises accumulated in the collective lives of Black people, but this is far from being the first of such times in history. Studies have shown how the intersection of race and class (e.g. people's work and labour, financial, and material conditions) contribute to the impact of the pandemic, targeting Black, migrant, and other minoritised communities disproportionately (Obinna 2021).

Terms like "double pandemic" (Starks 2021) or "intersecting viruses" (Nkomo 2020) allude to the way that the Covid-19 pandemic and structural racism connect. This crisis kept most of the world's population in several "lockdowns", and strongly dependent on digital media. Amid that, Black people around the world responded to the murder of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd, amongst many others – whose (explicit) deaths circulated on social media and televised news media – with larger and smaller solidarity protest actions and attempts to contest antiblackness in their various contexts. Slogans saying "white supremacy is the virus" and "racism is the real pandemic" powerfully illustrate how racism and white supremacist violence are understood as global and life-threatening forces that require the same critical and global attention as the coronavirus. Thus, we recognise the Covid-19 pandemic, and its media framing, as not only a health crisis, but also a crisis of racial – and outright, *racist* – politics.

Black visibility and/in the marketplace

Undoubtedly, Covid-19 has impacted Black people's lives and deaths in many ways. While it is important to acknowledge this, it is also essential to reflect on the shifting nature of forms of different yet interlinked crises, including the sense of temporality that they are imbued with. In the words of Ibrahim and Ahad (2022, 1): "How might various aspects of temporality contribute to what is knowable about Black life and moments of crisis? How does focusing on crisis reveal the constructedness of what is frequently taken to be natural and inevitable? How do crises draw us toward the precarities, but also the possibilities, of Black life?". Taking heed of these questions, we affirm an understanding of crisis as being both tangibly experienced and constructed by structural forces (e.g. racial capitalism – Robinson 1983) that determine who and what is newsworthy, normal, made visible, and deemed a crisis.

Throughout history, marketplace contexts have been sites of socio-political struggle, including responses to racism (Thomas, Johnson, and Grier 2023), from anti-apartheid consumer boycotts to the rise in brands declaring moral and political stances. However, the marketplace has also been a site of the commodification of messaging associated with certain people, cultures, and, even, social movements. "Gestural anti-racism" (Johnson 2022) uses the unjust socio-political climate as a backdrop against which institutions promote themselves as change-makers to a large and politically diverse, yet "progressive" population (Amponsah 2020; Benjamin 2019), including (middle-class) Black people whose purchasing power is increasingly framed as significant (Ball 2023). Unlike "the public assertiveness" (Quashie 2009, 329) of clear actions and signs that protest racism, gestural anti-racism reflects the "elite capture" of identity politics (Táíwò 2022) – it is symbolism devoid of substance; (re)presentations removed from material realities.

Relatedly, we explore invocations of Black joy in consumer culture, in the light of "cosmetic diversity", which centres around "feel-good differences … not on systemic disadvantages associated with employment, education, and policing" (Benjamin 2019, 19). We connect this to Ahmed and Swan's work (2006) which critically observed the diversity efforts employed by organisations to be approached as a "performance indicator". In Belgium, such efforts were identified by Withaeckx (2019) and Amponsah (2020) as opportunistic forms of institutional branding, including of universities and other institutions that conjure a multicultural "we-ness" to obscure inequalities amid crises. Consequently, Black grassroots discourse related to decoloniality in Belgium has been reframed by institutions as a marketing strategy, exhibited as billboards in a commercialised world where the bodies[2] of Black people may hint at an imagined social statement or may be simplistically perceived as symbolising a radically "progressive" stance. Informed by such matters, we analyse invocations of Black joy that appear to be part of Belgian and British media and marketing during the Covid-19-crisis. In doing so, we draw parallels between past and present commodifications of Black people's bodies, emotions, and cultural expressions. Prior to such further analysis, we briefly outline our methodological approach and scholarly works that have shaped it.

Bricolage methodology and Black temporality

Our article is informed by Miles' (2022, 367) insightful work which critically states that "[t]he discipline of sociology has privileged measuring, quantifying, and naming as essential modes of accounting for racism", but the insidiousness of racism is encountered in myriad ways that elude datafication processes and normative notions of academic enquiry. Accordingly, a meaningful analysis of (re)presentations of Black joy and the politics therein must

address some of the many ways that Black joy is felt, embodied, and experienced, without reducing either Black joy or antiblackness to a mere dataset or single theoretical intervention. Our methodology is also shaped by the expansive Black dream work and scholarship of Jones (2023, 6), who affirms the ways that Black people "approach their lives as archives", including approaches that "interweave personal testimonies with social critique". Overall, our bricolage methodology brings together analysis of adverts, media narratives, and elements of the landscape of public (re)presentations of Black people in Britain and Belgium.

We reiterate the resonant words of Bonilla-Silva (2019, 2), "I have been *feeling race* all my life". Informed by this theorising of "the racial economy of emotions" and reflections on "feeling race", we research and write about Black joy in a way that affirms the embodied nature of Black knowledge – that is, the knowledge that is inherent to what is felt, physically, emotionally, and intuitively, as Black people. Moving away from "methodological fundamentalism", our approach challenges dominant models of empirical inquiry and, to an extent, enables us to "dismantle, deconstruct and decolonise traditional ways of doing science, learning that research is always already both moral and political, learning to let go" (Denzin, Lincoln, and Giardina 2006, 770). In a sense, our methodology is the outcome of "how moments of emergency shift and redefine one's relationship to time and temporality" (Ibrahim and Ahad 2022, 1). Specifically, our methodology is non-linear and ebbed and flowed with the rhythms of our different lives, involving us revisiting our prior individual research projects (Amponsah 2020, 2021, 2023a, 2023b; Sobande 2020; 2022; 2023), through the lens of the current state of "permacrisis", while developing this piece which blends our previous and ongoing work on Black life in Belgium and Britain.

Our methodology is intended to affirm the notion of "Black temporality of crisis" (Ibrahim and Ahad 2022), including the significance of moments of mundanity and everydayness in the lives of Black people. Further still, our article has emerged from the history of us first meeting each other, which was online during the early days of the Covid-19 crisis, during which time our own media experiences and lives as Black people dovetailed. In a multitude of ways, our research approach is shaped by recognition that "[t]he study of racialized emotions has been an important intervention in sociology to understand the intimate nature of racialized social structures" (Miles 2022, 365). Thus, in addition to analysis of media and marketing, our methodology stems from reflections on *feelings* of Black joy. Overall, focusing on how Black joy is invoked in media and marketing content in Britain and Belgium, in the sections that follow we qualitatively reflect on the "vibes" of relevant depictions and discourse that we encountered between 2020 and 2023.

Analysis and discussion

"Turn black": Black Lives Matter (BLM) and Blackout Tuesday

On Tuesday 2 June 2020 Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Free University of Brussels, abbreviated VUB) updated their Facebook cover photo with a message welcoming students and staff back to the university premises after the "lockdowns". The cover photo drew attention to the Covid-measures, but not just that. Sparked by the online words and activity of US music executives Brianna Agyemang and Jamila Thomas, this Tuesday was also declared "Blackout Tuesday". The day involved hundreds of thousands of social media users, including organisations, posting a black square image in solidarity with Black people facing racism. The goal of Blackout Tuesday was to use people's reach to spread awareness and information about structural antiblackness, including in the music industry. The online distortion of the action was, however, widely criticised by activists for doing quite the opposite. Namely, disrupting the primary flow of information related to the case surrounding the murder of George Floyd and consequential protest actions (Blair 2021).

Despite being the only university in Belgium that appeared to participate in the Blackout Tuesday campaign, positioning itself in solidarity with the anti-racist struggle, VUB received harsh criticism for "missing the point" and for potentially using the BLM movement as a marketing stunt. The image in question was a collage in black, grey, and white covered by Covid-related symbols such as masks, virus balls, social-distancing signs, and hearts. Additionally, it portrayed three people, two of them Black. A darker skinned Black man is at the forefront, smiling, holding his arms wide open, joyfully welcoming whoever is looking at him. A lighter skinned Black woman is placed in the middle. Her eyes and mouth are wide open, and her fists are clenched beside her cheeks. She seems thrilled. This semiotically invokes the idea that Black people are happy to be (t)here at VUB, and, arguably, reflects a mediated framing of Black people's "capacity for affective expressions" (Yao 2021, 4), with the potential to strategically position them as supportive of/sympathetic to VUB during times of crisis. The third person is a white man waving at the camera. He is positioned at the left bottom of the image and is far less prominent than the other two people. This appears to be intentional; the words "WELCOME B(L)ACK!" make VUB's attempt to place itself in close proximity to blackness clear, and without explicitly addressing racism besides using the hashtags #BLM and #BlackoutTuesday.

The cultural climate during which the VUB image was posted, makes the white man in the picture token-like – a role that is typically assigned by marketing strategists to people of colour – to not appear "exclusively Black". After all, the university's staff and student population are still overwhelmingly white, despite the sense of multi-cultural "we-ness" that they may have attempted

to visually cultivate. Black people's unmistakable (re)presented joy functions as an "empty gesture" (Blair 2021) of allyship, while at the same time forming a signboard to a self-proclaimed diverse and socially just academic environment – perhaps, constituting a genre of "woke-washing" that alludes to blackness and associated issues of inequality and (un)inclusivity.

Not long after the "Welcome B(l)ack" upload, the banner was replaced by an identical image, though this time in the traditional VUB colours (white, blue, and orange). This image read "welcome back", which made the link to black-ness much less explicit. Matters related to structural racism and social injustice seemed to be pushed further into the background. However, a new profile picture was uploaded shortly after, portraying a black-white version of the VUB symbol, accompanied by the hashtag #SocialDistancing. The profile picture was a dubious gesture towards the "double pandemic" (Starks 2021), as it referenced one of the main Covid measures (social distancing) while hinting at the Blackout Tuesday campaign, albeit without explicit statements about the university's stance on racism and antiblackness.

It did not take long for the black squares and blackened profile pictures to fade across social media. Still, in our observations, since the global BLM upris-ings of 2020, Black people have been far more visible in the media and mar-keted public domains in Belgium and Britain. From TV commercials to billboards and social media ads, Black people and Black emotions appear to be treated as tools with which companies respond to certain crises (e.g. invocations of Black joy as crisis communications strategy) with "progressive" marketing choices, while at the same time targeting a new (Black) demo-graphic with perceived, or imagined, capital. It is a potential win-win for the marketing of institutions, including public sector and political ones.

As Walter and Glas (2024) suggest in the Special Issue's introduction, "the inclusion of minoritized groups at this crucial point in time in political and public debates is particularly important for societal cohesion". Yet, such inclusion can involve oppressive societal expectations of the emotional expressions *and* (re)presentation of Black people (e.g. Black joy and/or rage, on demand), as has been evidenced in research on mainstream media punditry by Black women in Belgium (Amponsah 2021). Hence, choosing to actively dis-engage from certain media, public, and political spheres, rather than visibly participate in them, can sometimes be more beneficial to the health and well-being of Black people, such as by protecting forms of privacy, peace, pleasure, and Black interiority. Mindful of that, we are reminded of Quashie's (2009) vital work on "The Trouble with Publicness: Toward a Theory of Black Quiet", which moves beyond an oppositional binary of public versus private, including when acknowledging certain public expressions of protest can be private too, invol-ving feelings and forms of intimacy.

While we have witnessed a rise in the visibility of Black people in Belgian media and public (re)presentations, Black people have historically been rather

absent from these domains, due to Belgium's separatist colonial policy which has long withheld the colonised Other from permanently settling in Belgium (Demart 2013). Early (re)presentations of Black people in Belgium include those in the context of "human zoos", which depicted Congolese people in violently racist "ethnological expositions", where white Belgians could, up until 1958, "behold" Africans in their so-called "natural" and "primitive" state: jolly, grateful, gracious (Stanard 2005). We draw mnemonic links between such forms of violently anti-Black spectatorship and some contemporary and corporate exhibitions of Black joy. It is from this space of "Black Cultural Memory" (Amponsah 2023a) that countering such spectacles with images and undocumented experiences of genuine joy in/and community can become an act of resistance and a political endeavour. Indeed, digital expressions of Black joy may at times challenge the hypervisibility of Black pain and death online. However, as Brock's (2020) key work *Distributed Blackness* points out, perceiving Black joy via a lens preoccupied with resistance distorts the fullness, intimacy, and levity of how Black joy can be experienced and expressed.

As part of our analysis of (re)presentations of Black joy in the present-day, we account for the history of Black experiences in the geo-cultural contexts that we are focusing on. From the 1990s onwards, when a first substantial wave of Congolese migrants settled in Belgium, Black people – often "mixed-race" – have been (re)presented in Belgian media in ambivalent ways. Initially as apoliticised figures: athletes, artists, veejays, and (token) characters in children's shows. Later as anti-racist experts whose entire personas were built upon personal anecdotes (public self-excavation) about racism. These juxtaposing forms of (re)presentation currently coexist, but, in the eyes of Belgian media, Black people cannot seem to embody both (a)political forms of (re)presentation at once. The notion of Black life as either intrinsically political or apolitical prevails while commodified invocations of Black joy operate in between these waterways. This involves media and marketing (re)presentations of Black emotion being particularly salient during the "double pandemic" (Starks 2021) – a time when many institutions have attempted to quell the justified concerns, anxieties, and anger of those who are disproportionately impacted by Covid-19 and entwined crises, while also constructing marketable notions of "we-ness" and campaigns about people being welcomed "b(l)ack".

Black on screen: "The Joy of Black", "Gravy Song", and "Dad's First Day"

In Britain, having caught the attention of brands such as Bumble, Channel 4, and Vogue, Black joy has been positioned as focusing on uplifting happiness, healing, and, as Channel 4 (2021a) puts it, "[c]elebrating real people, in real settings, living their best life today with no questioning of what that's worth". Promoting their online dating app and bringing together ideas

about Black joy and Black love, Bumble's (2020) use of the hashtag #MyLo-velsBlackLove encouraged people "to share joy and positivity". Put briefly, Black joy has been invoked in various mediated and marketed ways that are sometimes predicated on a binary of so-called positive and negative emotions. In the context of Channel 4 (2021a) – a free-to-air public broadcast television channel in Britain – Black joy has been part of "A multi-brand opportunity to celebrate the joy of your Black employees!". This was marketed in the following way: "To complement Black to Front, a day of programming and advertising that will see Channel 4's entire schedule fronted by Black talent, 4Sales are presenting brands with a unique opportunity to join in with this unique intervention".

In an online statement, Channel 4 (2021b) put out a call "to brands to join us in talking about and celebrating Black lived experiences as they are not as they could be or what others deem they 'should be'. Celebrating real people, in real settings, living their best life today with no questioning of what that's worth", as part of work that would take the form of "an ad-break takeover". Accompanying those statements were downloadable slides on the rationale behind "The Joy of Black", which blended the aspirational grammars of branding with expressions associated with Black life: "advertising", "celebrity", "airtime costs", "radical diversity intervention", "responsibility", "Black faces", "Black talent", "black excellence", "transform Black representation", "personalised taste", "best selves", "trauma", "vibe", "honest", "admiring" and "natural" (Channel 4, 2021b). Thus, this example reflects blurred lines between forms of branding, Black creative culture, and "the racial economy of emotions" (Bonilla-Silva 2019). By putting ideas about Black joy in dialogue with work associated with business and marketing activity, "The Joy of Black" might be perceived as reflecting some of the ways that Black joy has been (re)framed as a media and branding proposition (e.g. "A multi-brand opportunity to celebrate the joy of your Black employees!"), which potentially promotes restrictive respectability politics and ideas about Black "excellence" that equate professional success and the production of capital to the value of Black people's lives.

In "Dad's First Day", a different media/marketing example which relates to Black joy, Cadbury's televised advert depicts a suited Black man sitting in a car and speaking to his son on the phone, after time in a new place of work or education. After his son asks how his "first day was", his father slightly anxiously replies, "everyone was just, I dunno … younger", to which his son responds by reminding his father that he has "experience … . you're real clever … I wish I was like you". The shot lingers on the father's smile. His son then tells him that "I got you something … in the glove box", which turns out to be a Cadbury chocolate bar, sparking the father's quiet chuckles of contentment. Beyond clearly marketing their products, Cadbury's advert points to intergenerational moments of everyday love and support. But the

advert appears to avoid merely (re)presenting Black joy, and instead conjures a sentimentality that is aided by the potential relatability of somewhat universal experiences of familial/kin love *and* feelings of angst in response to new work and/or study situations. Thus, the advert might be perceived as exemplifying marketing allusions to Black joy, which, arguably, depart from the simplistic sense of spectacle and emotional binaries that are often part of them – here, momentarily, joy, angst, love, and comfort coalesce rather than conflict, but still in the service of promotional culture.

Another example of how Black joy has been alluded to in the British marketplace is the Sainsbury's "Gravy Song" Christmas advert in 2020. That Christmas, Sainsbury's released three televised adverts, all focused on different family scenes. One of these ("Gravy Song") depicted a Black family and included family-album style photos and video footage of Christmas over the years. As bruce's (2022) insightful work outlines, Black photograph albums and the sharing of images from them with other Black people online, can cultivate a sense of "diasporic intimacy". Focusing on digital experiences, including archives shared through social media, bruce (2022, 246) highlights "how the Black digital diaspora have found belonging online by imagining intimate kinships with one another". While the Sainsbury's "Gravy Song" advert is distinctly different to forms of photo-sharing on social media and the cultivation of "digital diasporic intimacy" (bruce 2022), we regard the ad's inclusion of family-album style photos as having the potential to convey some degree of Black diasporic resonance and relationality, with an emphasis on the joy and love that, for some people, can be part of spending time with family on special occasions. Thus, although "Gravy Song" is an advert, and in turn, is imbued with the logics of promotional culture, it is also a collection of media (re)presentations and content (e.g. photos, video, audio) which can connect to, or connote, Black culture and memory-making.

Unlike the other two adverts that were part of Sainsbury's trio of ads for Christmas 2020, the YouTube comments section for "Gravy Song" is turned off, perhaps reflecting the brand's attempt to mitigate racist online abuse. Although "Gravy Song" does not include the words "Black joy", it appears to depict the love, joy, and sentimentality that can be part of a Black family's experience of Christmas, particularly by fondly focusing on a phone call between a father and daughter. Writing about "Gravy Song", the British education organisation Design & Art Direction's (D&AD) President, Naresh Ramchandani (2020), described it as follows:

> Sainsbury's gave us a nicely observed, good humoured mini-slice of pandemic life –featuring a family that happened to be Black … In a Covid year, it made a message of Christmas f2f [face to face] nostalgia. But in a Black Lives Matter year, it virtue-signalled and cast a Black family in roles that detractors said a white family could have played. In this cautionary tale, Sainsbury's pushed every conceivable button of everyone fervently on one side of the nation's

identity politics. When seen this way, the resulting barrage of social media hate almost makes sense. Except of course it doesn't. Looked at more hopefully – and I would argue, more rationally – Sainsbury's did most things right.

As the above statements point to, although there were many responses to "Gravy Song" that praised the advert, there was also a deluge of "social media hate" and antiblackness. Hence, invocations of Black joy that are arguably part of "The Joy of Black", "Dad's First Day", and "Gravy Song" might be interpreted as resistant, insofar that they exist despite racist backlash. But we caution against impulses to project the framing of resistance onto these examples, as such impulses can reflect both: (1) a stifling societal politicisation of every element of Black life, and (2) brand and marketers' efforts to position consumerism as resistance. Additionally, we recognise the limitations presented by embracing ideas about Black joy in and through consumer culture, namely, the risk of Black joy becoming sloganised and commodified as *Black Joy^{TM}*, in a similar way to depoliticised corporate (re)presentations of the "Black is Beautiful" movement, and the marketplace's preoccupation with authenticity (aka Authenticity^{TM}, Banet-Weiser 2017).

(Re)presentation, not inclusion

As we have reflected on so far, throughout our personal lives we have noticed how ideas and invocations of Black joy have been integrated into the everydayness of our media and marketing-driven world. Another example of this is an advert for the National Railway Company of Belgium's (NMBS/SNCB) 2022–2023 winter promo deals, which featured an image of two young Black queer-coded women cosily enjoying their train ride. It is an unprecedented depiction of Black people's leisure that alludes to the sentiment of Black joy. Around the same time of the year, a billboard ad in the city of Brussels portrayed a Black family (a mother with two children) at a Christmas dinner, smiling and waving at what appears to be a screen (the screen itself is not visible in the picture), giving the impression of an intimate digital connection with a loved one who is not there. The display of a festive kitchen table and the overall appearance of the family resembles the average Ikea advert, but it really concerned an ad for Ria Money Transfer. The advert text read: "even when far away, stay close to your family". The depiction of a presumably middle-class Black family is at odds with prevailing connotations that link international money transfer services to working-class migrants of African descent. Here, middle-class blackness rooted in white society appears to appeal to the rebranding of practices and services that would otherwise be considered foreign or undesirable. The marketing of health insurance in Belgium reveals a similar phenomenon.

Certain images of Black people used by insurance companies speak to the conscience of a wider "progressive" population in a very specific socio-political and economic climate where Black lives matter (at least, to the profit

margins of some institutions). From digital banking to scrolling on Instagram, Black models are used to promote a variety of products and services. However, a few more clicks and a closer look at the websites behind these adverts sometimes reveal that the Black model(s) in our ads are one of the very few (if not only) Black models featured by the brand or service in question. This paradox reflects the very way "marketing gurus can make Black actors *appear* more visible than they really are in the actual film" (Benjamin 2019, 18). In line with such marketing strategies, Facebook dating adverts draw our attention with an image of two Black women leaning into each other for a cuddle.

The representation of a Black female couple is notable, because Black women have historically been absent from mainstream Belgian depictions and discourses of love *and* joy, especially if such love and joy is not shared with a white person. Many of these representations in adverts are algorithmically driven (Noble 2018), and as Black (queer) women we are likely to be targeted by ethnic tailored marketing strategies that expose us to Black (and queer) content, including products and services that use Black queer people (or gestural queerness, for that matter) as clickbait. However, such algorithmic processes do not account for all the marketed invocations of Black joy that we are exposed to. For many companies and organisations, these images are hand-picked by marketing employees. The Antwerp newspaper (Gazette van Antwerpen), for instance, posted an image of a Black woman on Mother's Day. She held two children, each giving her a kiss on the cheek. The fact that no white person was captured in the picture and the article did not address anything related to blackness or social justice, may initially suggest a "progressive" inclusion of Black people in the mundanity of Belgian life. Hence, it initially appears as though the explicit[3] presence of whiteness is no longer a crucial condition for Black media (re)presentation in Belgium, but we are constantly reminded of how these images land differently with us than they do with someone who sees the increased depiction of Black people in media and adverts as a threat to white society.

A top comment below the Mother's Day post, states "the media succeeds AGAIN in scaring off the Fleming with their COLOUR PICTURE". The contrast between the increased Black visibility in the media and marketplace and the increased hostility towards Black people's presence and participation in society – political and otherwise – is harrowing and raises questions about the way (re)presentations of Black joy function in favour of Black individuals, beyond granting (temporary) opportunities to inscribe into the capitalist structures of white supremacist society. There are differences between each of the media and marketing examples analysed in our article, but a thread that ties them together is their focus on racialised emotion. On that note, and in Bonilla-Silva's (2019, 2) words, "[m]uch like class and gender, race cannot come to life without being infused with emotions, thus, racialized

actors feel the weight of their categorical location". This weight is shaped by material conditions and structural expectations, including demands of displays of certain emotions (e.g. convivial Black joy) and the repression and pathologisation of others (e.g. Black angst, rage, and grief). Therefore, in addition to reflecting the visibility of (re)presentations of Black people in Belgium and Britain, the examples that we analysed may also be interpreted as reflecting certain societal expectations of when and how Black people experience and express joy. Once more, and shaped by Hall's (1993) work, we consider: what sort of moment is this in which to pose and respond to the question of Black Joy?

From Black joy to Black Joy^{TM}: Interiority, intimacy, and/or inclusion?

As long as there has been Black life, there has been Black joy. This includes feelings of delight and forms of connection and care from "the liberatory and communal potential of dreaming" (Jones 2023, 9) and being together, in ways untethered from structurally white imaginaries and institutions. In Belgium and Britain, and at a "moment" marked by many crises, consumer culture has invoked ideas of Black joy in ways that are typically detached from the everyday sense of Black relationality, interiority, and, at times "quiet" feelings, that can buttress Black joy. Against a backdrop of ongoing crises and marketplace competition, Black joy has become a metonym for Black (re)presentations and consumer culture (aka Black Joy^{TM}).

Black Joy^{TM} focuses on the media and marketplace inclusion and performance of Black people, in ways that overlook "the existence of variability among emoting racial subjects" (Bonilla-Silva 2019, 1), such as by overlooking that Black joy and its vibe is in fact felt and (un)expressed in lots of different ways. After all, Black joy is not merely Black people smiling or being *perceived* as publicly expressing joy. Rather, Black joy is intimate. It exists within and between Black people, and, always, beyond what can simply be "seen" or "sold". Such joy is in the rapturous laughter that can warm a funeral wake and it is also in the sense of silence that can come with contently basking in a loved one's company. As such, Black joy tells us much about both the expressivity and interiority of Black life (and death), whereas Black Joy^{TM} reduces that to mere malleable (re)presentations.

It is unsurprising that media and marketing content that invokes ideas about Black joy does not focus on matters related to pain, but such (re)presentations and their simplification of Black emotions in the form of a marketable shorthand must be understood as more than merely the byproduct of capitalism. Specifically, Black joy's treatment as a media and marketing framing in Belgium and Britain during the Covid-19 crisis reflects how "racialised emotions" (Bonilla-Silva 2019) are (re)presented to engender an

intercommunal and intracommunal "we-ness" (e.g. marketed Black love). Examples of this include invocations of Black joy to infer the remedying of crisis (e.g. Covid-19 and antiblackness) or to symbolise organisational responses to them, as is signalled by the multi-racial "we-ness" of the "WELCOME B(L)ACK" example in Belgium.

As Harris Combs (2023, 449) poignantly states in the article, "Finding Black Joy in a World Where We Are Not Safe", "Joy and laughter are my companions on this journey, but the joy I have does not come because everything is alright. Instead, it comes from a radical resolve to choose joy in a world of pain". This sense of self-governing and interiority which is crucial to experiences and expressions of Black joy contrasts with how it is (re)presented in media and marketing that reflects racial capitalist systems of value that yield "the racial economy of emotions" (Bonilla-Silva 2019). We contend that the moment Black joy is invoked in ways that are intended to be legible to the competition and, often, commerce-oriented marketplace, it may always, to an extent, become more of an expression of *Black Joy*[TM] – the commodification of Black emotions – than a reflection of the expressivity and sense of agency that gives life to Black joy. In the visibility-centric settings of media and marketing, where racialised emotions may be treated as a vehicle to capitalist ends, Black joy has increasingly been constructed in gestural terms. It has, in essence, become Black Joy[TM] – from glossy ad campaigns that position Black self-care and joy as shopping and a (middle-class) consumerist "soft life", to higher education, where institutional racism enables expectations that Black people perform gratitude, deference, and joy, even while faced with learning, teaching, and working in unsafe spaces.

The co-option and commodification of Black joy in Belgium reinforces the idea that Black people are only valuable insofar as they contribute to a multicultural society, rather than as individuals with their own unique experiences and cultures. In Britain, certain mediated and marketed invocations of Black joy may give the shallow impression of a more nuanced understanding of race and an embrace of blackness, or, at least, more surface-level interest in (re)presentations of Black life. We do not believe that Black joy is inherently pro-capitalist, (a)political, or performative. But we recognise that various media and marketplace framings of Black joy veer into these realms, and rhetorically remove Black joy from the forms of Black dreaming, love, relationality, and interiority that often nurture it. Relatedly, and informed by Stringfield's (2022) illuminating work on "#BlackScholarJoy: The Labor, Resistance and Joy Practices of Black Women Graduate Students", we affirm the perspective that "Higher education needs to take Black joy seriously" (Tichavakunda 2022). Doing so involves engaging with Black joy in ways that uplift it, while remaining critical of institutions' efforts to demand and (re)present Black joy in the service of marketing and crisis communications.

Sometimes experiences and (re)presentations of Black joy are visible, digitally mediated, and publicly articulated in ways which reflect that "markets are craving universalized blackness as commodity" (Drake 2019, 178). Yet in other cases, experiences of Black joy may be aided by forms of disengagement which cannot, and should not, be datafied, quantified, or perceived as a deficit of participation to be resolved. Black disengagement from certain forms of media, marketing, and political life is not innately a crisis. Rather, forms of Black disengagement can signify an intentional turning away from hostile conditions, including to spend more time tenderly and intimately turning towards each other, and in spaces of "Black Quiet" (Quashie 2009). Distinguishing between gestural Black Joy[TM] and Black joy, we embrace Black joy, while emphasising the importance of remaining critical of marketplace attempts to ameliorate and sloganise the emotions, energies, and experiences of Black people.

Notes

1. While this aspect of the study didn't specifically refer to the experiences of other "Mixed" Black people, we acknowledge that different "Mixed" Black people can also face such assaults, including due to forms of anti-Black racism which intersect with other forms of oppression, such as colourism, xenophobia, and anti-Asian racism.
2. We affirm critique of using the term "bodies" in relation to Black people. Our use of it here is intended to reflect how Black people are often societally viewed in such oppressive ways.
3. The presumably "mixed-race" children in the picture allude to the possible presence of a white partner, making the image potentially less "alienating" to certain white audiences.

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Data availability statement

All data is provided in full in this paper.

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