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Searching for Black Santa: The Contested History of an American Holiday Tradition

E. James West

Arts and Sciences, University College London, London, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

This article explores the contested history and complex politics of the Black Santa in the United States from the antebellum period to the present day. For white journalists and entertainers during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the blackface Santa reinforced white dominance and the supposed inferiority of Black people. From the 1910s into the 1950s, Black educators and civic reformers saw the 'Negro Santa Claus' as a way of elevating Black self-esteem and countering racist versions of the character. For some activists and business leaders, the 'Civil Rights Santa' that emerged in parallel with the postwar African American freedom struggle could promote 'good interracial feelings in the community', and for others he belonged on the frontlines of the battle for racial equality. The Black Power Santa or 'Soul Santa' who came in his wake served as a symbol of Black cultural pride and economic self-determination. Finally, the modern Black Santa works to reconcile the more confrontational politics of earlier iterations with a celebration of American multiracialism and corporate responsibility. Across time and space, these different versions of the Black Santa embody competing and, at times, contradictory racial ideologies and representational politics, providing an important window into the relationship between civil rights, cultural politics, and consumer capitalism in the modern United States.

KEYWORDS

United States; African American; Christmas; Civil rights; Santa Claus; Cultural politics; Black power; Blackface

In a December 2013 article for *Slate* magazine, Black journalist Aisha Harris reflected on her childhood memories of the holiday season and of one character in particular. Harris recalled that 'I knew two different Santa Clauses'. Both featured a rotund belly, rosy cheeks and white beard; staple traits of a festive phenotype that had taken root in the United States over the previous two centuries (Marling 2001; Restad 1995). However, there was one notable distinction. The first Santa – the character Harris recognized from school, the mall, and television – was white. The second – a figure largely confined to the cards and figurines in Harris's home – was Black. The journalist felt embarrassed that her family's Black Santa wasn't the 'real thing' (2013). As an adult, with a clearer understanding of how enduring patterns of racial and social injustice were linked to white cultural hegemony, this had become a call to action. Rejecting the 'melanin-deficient

CONTACT E. James West  e.james.west@ucl.ac.uk  Arts and Sciences, University College London, London, United Kingdom

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Santa [that] remains the default', Harris challenged the nation to 'ditch Santa the old white man'. Her suggestion was seized upon by right-wing commentators such as *Fox News* host Megyn Kelly, who dismissed Harris as 'yet another person claiming "it's racist to have a white Santa"'. In a subsequent edition of Kelly's primetime show, the presenter implored any children watching at home to remember that 'Santa just *is* white' (*Fox News* 2013).

The backlash to Harris's article was indicative of Christmas's role in the latest iteration of the nation's 'culture wars' (Thomson 2010), with conservative commentators denouncing an alleged 'War on Christmas' by progressive, secular activists. More specifically, Kelly's contention that 'Santa just *is* white' reflected widespread cultural assumptions about, and representations of, Santa Claus. Recent surveys of 'Santa Schools' and trade organizations such as the Real Santas Booking Agency indicate that the ranks of professional Santas remain overwhelmingly dominated by white men (Spata 2017; Stone 2016). Most tellingly, Kelly's assertion can be situated within a longer history of white investment in the racial identity of Santa Claus. We can trace a direct line between Kelly's remarks and those of earlier 'commentators' such as 1970s television character Archie Bunker, who maintained that 'Jesus was white and so is Santa', and mid-century white Santa impersonators, who mocked Black children with claims that 'there ain't no Santa Claus for n----' (Papers of the NAACP 1955; Sanders 1972). That so many white Americans have remained invested in Santa's racial identity betrays their commitment to whiteness as a default within American society. It also reveals a profound anxiety of, and animosity towards, depictions that would complicate the perceived authenticity of Santa's racial hegemony.

Drawing on periodicals, organizational records, oral histories, and other material, this article explores the contested history and complex politics of the Black Santa in the United States. My understanding and usage of the term 'Black Santa' is not limited to engagement with and portrayals of Santa Claus by Black people. As I argue here, many early iterations of the character were created or performed by whites as part of blackface minstrel traditions. Nor am I concerned with litigating the 'true' racial identity of Santa Claus, a composite character inspired by Saint Nicholas, a fourth century Christian bishop. My intentions here are illustrative, not exhaustive: making note of every noteworthy appearance or performance of the Black Santa throughout American history is far beyond the scope of this article. Instead, I am interested in unpacking the broader significance of the Black Santa as both specter and symbol. As this article demonstrates, Santa Claus may be fictionalized, but the character's cultural representation and racial identity carry real-world consequences. Across time and space, different iterations of the Black Santa have embodied competing and, at times, contradictory racial ideologies and representational politics.

For white journalists and entertainers during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the blackface Santa existed to reinforce white dominance and the supposed inferiority of Black people. From the 1910s into the 1950s, Black educators and civic reformers saw the 'Negro Santa Claus' as a means of elevating Black self-esteem and countering racist versions of the character. For some activists and business leaders, the 'Civil Rights Santa' that emerged in parallel with the postwar African American freedom struggle could promote 'good interracial feelings in the community' (*Atlanta World* 1955). For others, he belonged on the frontlines of the battle for racial equality. The

Black Power Santa or ‘Soul Santa’ who came in his wake served as a symbol of Black cultural pride and economic self-determination (*Ebony* 1969). Finally, the modern Black Santa works to reconcile the more confrontational politics of earlier iterations with a celebration of American multiracialism and the power of the market. Through these and other guises, I argue that the Black Santa helps to illuminate the possibilities of Black citizenship and the limitations of Black representation, and offers a compelling insight into the relationship between civil rights, cultural politics, and consumer capitalism in the modern United States.

Slavery, Santa, and the “Benign Plantation”

As Penne Restad (1995) articulates, conventional understandings of Christmas in the United States run something like this: the antipathy of Puritan forefathers towards Christmas lingered into the early decades of the new republic. This began to shift during the early 1800s, as the popularity of writers such as Charles Dickens and Washington Irving, the festive proclivities of Old World immigrants, and the development of American consumer culture helped to nationalize and homogenize its celebration. European festive archetypes such as the English ‘Sir Christēmas’, the Dutch ‘Sinterklaas’, and the German ‘Belsnickel’ all contributed to the emergence of the modern American Santa Claus. By the end of the century, Americans ‘had forged a new, splendid, and popular Christmas’, complete with many of the trappings and characters we are familiar with today (Restad 1995). While scholars such as Karal Marling (2001) and Stephen Nissenbaum (1996) have tweaked this timeline, they have largely adhered to Restad’s framing of the holiday’s institutionalization. Certainly, by the beginning of the twentieth century, Christmas appears to have become firmly entrenched within American popular and civic culture.

As a collective, historians of the United States have appeared less willing to unpack the racial politics of Christmas, particularly during the first half of the nineteenth century when holiday traditions were beginning to crystallize. For example, beyond acknowledging the holiday’s importance in the plantation calendar, many scholars have skirted over the experiences of enslaved people at Christmastime, helping to reinforce enduring tropes of white festive goodwill. As Robert May notes in *Yuletide in Dixie* (2019), the notion that enslaved people were ‘happiest at Christmas’ remained prevalent well into the latter half of the twentieth century, simplifying the extent to which the experiences of enslaved people at Christmastime varied across the American South. In her own contribution to this special issue, Rebecca Fraser (2023) highlights how these experiences could vary dramatically on a state or even plantation level, with some enslaved people partaking in ‘feasting and gift giving’, and others ‘excluded from enjoying the brief privileges that were expected during the festive period’. For some planters, the festive period brought heightened anxieties over the threat of uprisings, prompting punitive efforts to reassert racial control.

Interviews with formerly enslaved people conducted by the Federal Writers’ Project provide another perspective on the experiences of enslaved people during Christmas time, and, more specifically, shed light on Black engagements with the figure of Santa Claus. Alice Green (FWP 1936c), born in Clarke County, Georgia, contends that ‘us chillum had a heap of fun a-lookin’ for Santa Claus’, and Wheeler Gresham (FWP 1936c)

of Wilkes County, GA, informed his interviewers that ‘Santa Claus found his way to the Quarters and left the little negroes stick candy.’ Anderson Edwards (FWP 1936e), a Texan Baptist preacher, relayed that “I got Santa Claus twice in slavery, ‘cause massa gave me a sack of molasses candy once and some biscuits once”. Minnie Davis (FWP 1936b), who was born into slavery in Greene County, Georgia, also recalls the holiday fondly. Davis maintained that ‘Christmas was a grand time at Marse John’s’, where gifts were distributed by white women who ‘played Santa Claus to slave children’. Elsie Reece (FWP 1936f), born a slave of John Mueldrew in Grimes County, Texas, intimated something similar: “When Missie Mary holler, ‘Santa Claus ‘out due’, us all gathers at de door and purty soon Santa ‘pears with de red coat and long, white whiskers . . . he gives us each de sack of candy and a pair of shoes from de store.”

Marie Jenkins Schwartz (2014), Joycelyn Moody (2014), and other scholars have done yeoman’s work in unpacking questions of reliability and historical memory around the WPA slave narratives, and we should be cautious not to accept these recollections as simple fact. Similarly, we should note that the assimilation of Santa Claus into southern plantation traditions was far from uniform, with some formerly enslaved people informing the WPA’s interviewers that “us nebber know nutting ‘bout Santa Claus ‘til freedom” (FWP 1936d). Nevertheless, the majority of stories suggest that the utilization of Santa Claus by white slave-owners was shaped by highly paternalistic attitudes towards Black people. In recollections that do mention Santa Claus in a positive light, it is striking that white people tend to serve as figurative (and at times, literal) Santa Clauses, helping to reinforce notions of slave-owner benevolence and the dependency of enslaved people upon their masters. This usage would align with the broader ways that slave-owners utilized the holiday season to manage slave resistance and minimize the risk of ‘Christmas revolts’ (May 2019). Given the potential of a Black Santa to subvert or disrupt this dynamic, it is perhaps unsurprising that there is little evidence of the character’s presence in antebellum southern culture.

While the end of the Civil War brought freedom and citizenship to four million enslaved people across the American South, it failed to provide the economic emancipation that Black people demanded. After president Andrew Johnson had quashed the promise of ‘forty acres and a mule’, many Black Southerners were forced into the coercive labor system known as sharecropping, often working the same land for the same people they had previously called master. These continuities meant that ‘traditional scripts of Christmas behaviors’ took time to break down (May 2019). This can be seen through the recollections of figures such as Peter Hamilton (FWP 1936a), who was born in Bolivar County, Mississippi, several years after the end of the Civil War, and whose mother continued to work on the same plantation of her youth. Hamilton recalls that, during the festive period, his mother returned to the ‘big house’, where her former master handed out things to put in the stockings of Black children. If Black children had been ‘good . . . the white folks would make a Santa Claus out of clothes and stuff it, put a pack on his back, and stand him up in the road.’

Hamilton’s recollections reinforce the enduring role of Santa Claus as a symbol of white southern benevolence during the decades following the Civil War. In some ways, his memories parallel the efforts of white journalists, folklorists, and historians to romanticize the realities of antebellum slave life during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Perhaps best articulated through the work of southern historian

Ulrich B. Phillips, such approaches consistently downplayed the brutality of the slave economy, downplayed the efforts of enslaved people to resist their captivity, and emphasized the benefits of slavery in helping to ‘civilize’ Black people. For slavery abolitionists, Christmas became a useful opportunity to reiterate the myth of a ‘benign plantation’. In his influential 1918 treatise *American Negro Slavery*, Phillips (1959) described Christmas on the plantation as a time of ‘leisure’, when masters distributed ‘coffee, molasses, tobacco [and] calico’. Nevertheless, Hamilton’s responses to his WPA interviewers also suggest an evolution in the role of Santa Claus during the postbellum era, with his appearance to Black folk becoming more contingent on their ability to adhere to white-defined patterns of acceptable social behavior: ‘white folks would tell us if we stole chickens, eggs, ducks and things or go in the apple orchard . . . Santa Claus would not come to us’ (FWP 1936a).

This retributive dimension reflected the hardening of white supremacy during the aftermath of Reconstruction and the entrenchment of Jim Crow segregation across the South, and paved the way for some of the earliest references to Black Santas in southern print culture. One instructive example appears in December 1895 article for the *Macon Telegraph*, which was subsequently reprinted in newspapers across the country. The article features ‘Uncle Sawney’, a version of the ‘Tom’ stereotype made famous by author Harriet Beecher Stowe, who is berating his relative Lucindy Brown for failing to teach her children about Santa Claus. In response, Brown asks Sawney, ‘hab you eber seed er n---- Sana Claus?’ When Sawney admits that he hasn’t, Brown seizes on this admission as evidence that the societal absence of the Black Santa, and the racist attitudes of white people, made it pointless to teach her children about Santa Claus: ‘de n---- baby . . . knows dat no white Sana Claus ain’ gwine cum down er n---- chimbly ter bring er n---- nuthin’ (*Macon Telegraph* 1895). Such caricatured representations indicate a shift in white southern approaches to, and representations of, the historical and contemporary relationship between Black people and Santa Claus. By the late nineteenth century, white southerners appeared increasingly willing to deny Black people access to the nation’s most recognizable festive character. Such denials were arguably reflective of broader efforts to exclude Black people from American holiday traditions, and paralleled the increasing marginalization of Black people within contemporary American society.

“Dis Santa Claus Bizness”

If nineteenth century Southern society appeared to have little place for the Black Santa, then the emergence of what I describe as Blackface Santas outside of the South offer another perspective on the complex intersections of Blackness and Christmas in the developing American nation. Beyond the strictures of bondage, Susan Davis (1982) has noted how early festive traditions in ‘free’ society were profoundly shaped by the politics of race. It is striking to note how the formalization of American Christmas traditions occurred in tandem with the growing popularity of blackface minstrelsy, a theatrical practice where whites ‘caricatured blacks for sport and profit’ (Lott 1993). While North American traditions of blackface can be traced to eighteenth century performers such as Lewis Hallam Jr., the figure most commonly credited with popularizing blackface minstrelsy is Thomas Rice, who first achieved national stardom during the 1830s. If Penne Restad (1995) argues that the ‘modern Christmas’ had solidified by the 1840s, so

too does this decade mark a highpoint for Blackface minstrelsy as ‘the most widely disseminated and commercially successful entertainment form of the nineteenth century’ (Johnson 2012). In retrospect, it is unsurprising that as American festive traditions were modernized and commercialized, the nation’s most ubiquitous form of popular culture would assume an increasingly prominent role.

One space where we can trace the intersections of Blackface minstrelsy and American festive traditions is the theatre. Dale Cockrell (1997) suggests that travelling shows and musical troupes embraced Christmas as an opportunity to stage ‘a full evening of holiday blackface entertainment’. Accordingly, it was not uncommon for American theatres and music halls to stage a double bill featuring Christmas-themed pantomimes ‘performed in concert with a minstrel show’. Stephen Nissenbaum (1996) suggests lived performances were far from the only occasion that ‘Santa Claus converged with blackface minstrelsy’ in the urban North, with these parallel interests also interacting through sheet music and other forms of cultural ephemera. One prominent example was an 1840 collection of minstrel songs, authored by ‘Santaclaus’ and credited to Thomas Rice.

The interplay between developing Christmas and Blackface traditions was most apparent on the streets of cities such as New York and Philadelphia, where Christmas celebrations often manifested themselves through public festivals and other forms of white street culture. Davis (1982) asserts that Blackface was ‘a popular theme in the street Christmas’ from the 1830s onwards. Christian DuComb (2017) concurs, contending that unruly bands of young white men, ‘sometimes cross-dressed and often in blackface’, were a familiar site in urban centers at Christmastime. By donning Blackface, white Americans both directly and indirectly worked to undermine belief in Black social and political equality. In addition, such problematic public displays complemented broader efforts to police the movement and presence of Black people within the city. As free Black populations in the urban North expanded, conservative politicians, religious reformers, and proslavery advocates all warned that interaction across the color line represented ‘a major threat to . . . racial and social order’ (Harris 2003). The revelry of Christmastime offered an opportune moment for cross-racial intimacy, and sparked backlash from whites eager to reassert their social and spatial dominance. Thus, it was common to see the ‘unruly bands’ described above ‘threatening and occasionally attacking . . . free blacks’ (DuComb 2017). Similarly, in his landmark study *The Wages of Whiteness*, David Roediger (1991) points to the mobbing of Black city residents during the festive period, with Black revelers ‘set upon by attackers in Blackface’, including, quite possibly, whites dressed as Black Santa Claus.

While Blackface minstrelsy as a national pastime reached its peak during the decades immediately prior to the American Civil War, the Blackface Santa only appeared to gain appeal during the second half of the nineteenth century (Lott 1993). Adverts for shows featuring Blackface Santas continued to appear regularly in major publications such as the *New York Times* (1886), helping to reaffirm the connections between Santa Claus and blackface minstrelsy. Blackface Santas were paraded at children’s parties and corporate gatherings. The *Buffalo Evening News* (1908) reported on one gathering of admen who were treated to a double helping of Santa Clauses; one of the ‘regular, old-fashioned variety’, and another masquerading as ‘a coal lack negro Santa Claus’, but who ‘showed up white beyond the mark where a small boy stops washing his face’. Enthusiasm for Blackface Santas carried to the highest levels of white society. During the 1915 holiday

season, president Woodrow Wilson and wife Edith Bolling participated in an 'old-fashioned Christmas celebration' as part of their honeymoon in Hot Springs, Virginia. As reported in *The Tennessean* (1915) and other media outlets, the president and his guests 'convulsed with laughter' at the entertainment provided by a 'dusky Santa Claus'.

During the Gilded Age and into the Progressive Era, mainstream American newspapers also began to supplement their continued coverage of Blackface Santas with a new type of content: comedic vignettes or adverts about fictionalized Black Santas that appeared during the festive season. In a December 1890 edition of the California-based *Ferndale Express*, a local department store published an advert that included an eight-line poem about a 'Negro Santa Claus'. Leaning heavily into racial caricatures and exaggerated ebonics, the poem relayed an unfortunate encounter between the Black Santa and a suspicious onlooker: 'Hi! mistah man call off yo' dawg, do yo' took me faw a chieken thief? I'se a cull'ed Santa Claus, gatherin' stock, dat yo' treats me so is past belief' (*Ferndale Express* 1890). In another unfortunate episode, a Black Santa in Bloomfield, New Jersey, was reported to have fallen down a chimney before being set upon by 'the surprised occupants of the room' (*Courier-Journal* 1901). When met with the 'fiery altar of realism', Black Santas were regularly set ablaze, including Philemon Rastus Mercer, an 'aged negro' whose Santa costume and whiskers caught fire during an ill-fated chimney climb on Christmas Eve (*New York Times* 1905). Every fresh mishap or chimney fall was an opportunity for white advertisers and newspaper editors to enact fantasies of racialized violence that reiterated the inadequacy of the Black Santa for their readers. The message was clear: just as the Black Santa could never take the place of the 'true' white Santa, so too could Black Americans never be seen as true equals of their white counterparts. In the words of Philemon Rastus Mercer, 'Dis Santa Claus bizness am a snare an' a delusion . . . him who is playin' wif lies and sich things am bound ter be defiled' (*New York Times* 1905).

A Negro Santa Claus

As such examples demonstrate, by the turn of the twentieth century the Black Santa, whether represented through blackface minstrelsy or fictional tales, had become a tool for white racists to reassert damaging beliefs about Black people. However, against this backdrop, African Americans began to formulate their own versions of the character. The impetus for such work often came from Black children, as a way of feeling part of American holiday traditions. Letters to local newspapers showed little sign that white racism had dulled the appeal of Santa Claus for Black children, with one young reader of the *Buffalo Times* (1914), declaring that 'Mammy says Sandie Klaws was only made for white child[ren], but I says there's one for little colored boys like me, too'. Similarly, Black periodicals such as the *Nashville Globe* (1909) routinely printed letters to Santa Claus from excited children who listed requests for toys such as 'a colored, kinky-headed doll', and hoped that 'black Santa Claus can bring me something nice'. Black churches were one community institution that sought to address such demands, although not always with positive results. When an African American congregation in eastern Indiana hired a local Black man to play the role of Santa Claus for its Sunday School group, he was struck by the same type of mishap that befell many fictionalized versions of the character.

The *Indianapolis Star* (1907) reported that in the process of distributing gifts, the Santa's beard and clothing caught fire, leaving him 'seriously burned about the head and neck'.

Charity organizations also looked to address demands for greater Black festive representation, including Volunteers of America (VoA), which was founded in 1896 in New York City. From early on in its history, the organization used Santa as a marketing spokesman to raise awareness of low-income and vulnerable people. In 1919, VoA affiliates in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, decided to provide Black children living in the Hill District with their very own 'Negro Santa'. Reveling in occasion, VoA representative Frank Wise declared that the Santa was 'the first "Negro Santa" known to history or folklore or legend' (*Pittsburgh Press* 1919). This was clearly an overstatement, but local media coverage reiterated how the Santa's appearance was predicated on the demands of Black children, and also emphasized the positive response to his unveiling. Reporting that the Santa's arrival was the direct result 'of appeals from poor colored children', the *Pittsburgh Daily Post* (1919) offered a detailed description of the Santa's appearance and street activities, where he remained 'the center of a never-diminishing crowd of youngsters of his own race'. The scale of this public response from Pittsburgh's Black community prompted VoA to continue its 'Negro Santa' project into the 1920s.

In his own work on Black Santas, Charles Springwood (2009) suggests that early manifestations of the character were possible 'only in so far as it can serve to parody blackness or provoke whiteness.' Yet this binary framing underplays the extent to which Black people, and particularly Black children, valued race-conscious representations of Santa Claus as a model of participatory inclusion. For whites, it appeared easy to dismiss the 'unorthodox' Black Santa who 'sall[ied] forth with ebony-hued cheeks' (*Pittsburgh Press* 1921). Yet for Black children, this small accommodation could prove revelatory. From this perspective, representational demands were less a provocation than a necessary alternative to the continuing popularity of blackface Santas. In the face of such crude caricatures, a positive reclamation of the Black Santa by Black communities carried significant social and psychological benefits. Newspapers such as the *Black Dispatch* leaned into the Black Santa as a symbol of hope. In a 1917 editorial cartoon, the *Dispatch* pictured a Black Santa carrying a 'Sack of Opportunity' filled with presents such as 'Justice', 'Prosperity', and 'Race Love'. Attempting to climb over a barrier made up of issues such as 'Segregation' and 'Mob Violence', the Santa pointedly declared that "it's a high fence but I'll get these things to 'em' (*Black Dispatch* 1917).

By the 1930s, this realization had attracted the attention of prominent Black entertainers and celebrities, most notably Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson. Born in Virginia in 1878, Robinson was familiar with blackface having made his name on the minstrel and vaudeville circuit during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Robinson was one of the first Black performers to appear without the use of blackface makeup, although his continued use of the exaggerated Black mannerisms that underpinned minstrel performances irked some sections of the African American community. After making the transition to Broadway in the late 1920s, Robinson's charisma and extraordinary dancing talents helped him to establish a reputation as one of nation's most popular entertainers. While Robinson was reluctant to express strong public views on racial politics, biographers James Haskins and N. R. Mitgang (1988) assert that the entertainer was always attuned to 'the poverty and suffering of black people'. His generosity was

regularly noted by Black publications such as the *Chicago Defender* (1933), which praised Robinson for ‘play[ing] Santa’ through helping ‘many needy families’.

In 1936, Robinson’s figurative role became a literal one, when he collaborated with the New York Urban League to perform as Santa Claus at the organization’s annual Christmas Party for underprivileged children. The location of Robinson’s appearance was significant; close to the heart of Harlem, a neighborhood famously described by Black writer Claude McKay (1940) as the ‘Negro capital of the world’. The *New York Times* (1936) noted that Robinson’s appearance marked a significant departure from Harlem’s reliance on ‘a pallid Santa Claus imported from downtown’, finally providing the neighborhood with a Santa befitting its Black residents. Robinson’s turn as Santa garnered major media coverage and arguably marked the first time that the daily press had documented Black performances of Santa Claus in a sympathetic light. The entertainer’s turn eventually led to him becoming the first African American inducted into the International Santa Claus Hall of Fame, and also helped to open the door for other Black Santas. Within a few years, Santas played by Black people had begun to appear in Baltimore, Chicago, and other cities across the nation (*Afro-American* 1940; *Chicago Defender* 1946).

These developments were welcomed by many African Americans, and by Black children in particular. In an era when American educational and popular culture was characterized by systemic Black under- and misrepresentation, the opportunity to encounter a racially inclusive version of Santa Claus was a source of tremendous pride. For some, the experience of meeting a genuine ‘Negro Santa Claus’ rather than a derogatory blackface Santa proved almost too much to bear. In Memphis, Tennessee, local school teacher Walter Tamphlet was forced to find shelter after his appearance as a street Santa led to hundreds of Black children ‘stamped[ing] through police in an effort to reach him’ (*Jet* 1951). As the prevalence of Santa Clauses played by Black people increased, such performances helped to disrupt the predominance of the blackface Santa and provide Black people with more positive holiday interactions. At the same time, it is important to note that blackface Santas did not suddenly disappear. Accordingly, while the trend towards Black Santas over Blackface Santas persisted, white and Black people both performed these roles during the 1940s and 1950s, with both versions existing in a delicate and, at times, uneasy balance.

Perhaps, the best example of this tension can be traced through the evolution of the Amos ‘n’ Andy Show, an enormously successful radio sitcom created by white entertainers Charles Correll and Freeman Gosden, which began syndication in 1928. The show focused on the lives of two Black friends, Amos Jones and Andy Brown, who had moved to Chicago as part of the Great Migration. Correll and Gosden voiced the show’s protagonists, and their comedic depictions of Black life and culture drew sustained complaints from Black listeners (Barlow 1999). Despite the efforts of Black publications such as the *Pittsburgh Courier* to have the show removed from the air, it quickly became one of the most popular radio programs in the country. In 1940, the show’s traditional Christmas episode featured Andy, voiced by Correll, accepting a role as Santa Claus at a local department store. After being expanded from a 15-min weekday serial into a weekly half-hour radio comedy in 1943, Amos ‘n’ Andy made the leap to television in 1951, with CBS hiring Correll and Gosden as producers of a new weekly series. The visual format, combined with shifting social attitudes, prompted the show’s creators to utilize Black actors in the main roles, with Alvin Childress playing Amos, and Spencer Williams playing Andy. The popular Christmas episode also crossed over, making

Williams one of the first Black people to play Santa Claus on network television (Clayton 1961).

A Civil Rights Santa

Williams's performance in the Amos 'n' Andy Christmas special crystallizes some of the enduring tensions within public attitudes towards, and representations of, the Black Santa. As Elizabeth Pleck (2000) notes, the show demonstrated to a predominantly white audience 'that goodness and decency triumphed in black as well as white homes'. Williams's portrayal of Santa Claus helped to familiarize millions of Americans with the notion of a Black Santa for the first time, and anchored a Black-centered Christmas story that, at its core, was story about love, family, and human decency. The show was a cross-racial hit, and many families made a tradition of watching it at Christmastime. This was the case for Black historian Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1994), who fondly recalled his childhood memories of the show in a later article for the *New York Times*. Gates declared that 'the big event of Christmas Eve was always the Amos "n" Andy Christmas television episode', which provided him with a thrilling glimpse into the all-Black world of Harlem that Amos and Andy inhabited, with 'an all-black department store, owned and operated by black attendants for a black clientele, whose children could sit on the lap of a black Santa Claus'.

Yet at the same time, Williams's performance reiterated how the show's core content and appeal had remained consistent following the transition from radio to television. While the show's main characters were now played by Black rather than white actors, Childress and Williams were instructed to model their performances closely on the speech and behavioral patterns established by Gosden and Correll throughout its radio run (Barlow 1999). Accordingly, Williams's Santa was rooted in Blackface minstrelsy. For civil rights organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the shift to a visual format only exacerbated the show's racial stereotypes. In response, NAACP Administrator Roy Wilkins penned a list of reasons why the show should be taken off air, which included the claim that every Black character was 'either a crook or a clown', and that the show strengthened white beliefs in Black people being 'inferior, lazy, dumb and dishonest'. Members of the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) agreed, embarking on a concerted effort 'to demonstrate the bad effects of the Amos "n" Andy show' (NAACP 1952; NAACP 1951). By the time the Christmas episode aired in late 1952, these protests had disquieted CBS to such an extent that it had 'commenced plans to cancel one of its first hits' (Andrews and Juilliard 1986).

While few of these protests appear to have been directed specifically towards its representation of a Black Santa, the popularity of the Christmas episode helped to bring some of the show's myriad issues into sharper focus for its detractors. This was certainly the case for Gates later in life, when he decided to revisit the Christmas episode with his own family. After the viewing, the historian was brusquely informed by his children that the malapropisms, gullibility, and deferential servitude of the show's main characters were 'pathetic' (Gates 1994). More broadly, the backlash to Amos 'n' Andy following its television debut, which outstripped earlier efforts to get its radio iteration taken off air, was an indicator of how the 'national conversation on race' had shifted over the previous two decades. During the intervening years, legal challenges to segregation,

the integration of the Armed Forces, and other breakthroughs had raised hopes that the dial was beginning to move on the issue of civil rights. Black opposition to the Amos 'n' Andy television show was far from universal, but its cancellation demonstrated the growing influence of civil rights organizations and their attentiveness to the relationship between representations of Blackness in American culture and the status of Black people within contemporary society (Barlow 1999).

African Americans were also becoming more attuned to how Black economic clout could be leveraged in the struggle for racial equality. Over the previous two decades, Black consumer power had grown considerably. In the same year that Amos 'n' Andy's Christmas episode was released, Joseph Johnson (1952) published *The Potential Negro Market*, which estimated that Black Americans' annual incomes now exceeded \$11 billion. A revival of Black migration out of the South during the World War II era accelerated the emergence of geographically concentrated and upwardly mobile 'Negro Markets' that white corporations, as well as Black media and marketing experts, observed with interest (Weems 1998). Yet at the same time, Black people continued to be discriminated against by many white-owned retailers and corporate advertisers. This was rendered most obvious at Christmas; a season of conspicuous consumption and gift-giving. Accordingly, early Black consumer boycotts, such as the 'Don't Buy Where You Can't Work' campaigns of the 1930s, strategically targeted the holiday period to maximize commercial disruption. This strategy continued into the World War II era, with Black organizers across the country encouraging African Americans to boycott white-owned businesses that failed to 'show goodwill to all men' (Parker 2019).

Within this context, the Black Santa was resituated at the center of simmering debates about Black rights and consumer citizenship, as African Americans' engagement with mass consumption increasingly moved beyond a focus on material life to include 'the goals of greater freedom, democracy, and equality' (Cohen 2003). Eager to avoid the negative press and financial penalties associated with boycotts, white-owned enterprises responded by hiring Black Santas as a means of promoting 'good interracial feeling in the community' (Atlanta World 1955). By the early 1960s, coverage of this new wave of Black Santas, as well as their reception by a multiracial constituency, had become something of a cottage industry for Black periodicals. In a representative article from January 1962, *Jet* magazine reported on a Black Santa making his 'debut' at a white-owned music store in downtown Atlanta. The publication noted that reactions to the Santa were somewhat mixed, although 'snide remarks and snooty stares were notably absent'. Significantly, *Jet* included quotes from store-owner Helen Mantel who explicitly framed the hiring as a business decision: 'I figure our trade is 90% from the Negroes. I'm trying to please them' (*Jet* 1962).

Such concessions did little to satisfy Adam Clayton Powell, whose control of New York's 16th District made him one of the most powerful, and controversial, Black leaders in the country. In 1963, during an address at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, Powell called upon African Americans to 'boycott Santa Claus this Christmas' by refusing to participate in festive gift-giving (Egelhof 1963). The preacher's demands followed calls for a Christmas boycott from other Black activists in response to the 16th Street Baptist Church Bombing in Birmingham, Alabama, where a terrorist attack by the Ku Klux Klan killed four young Black girls (Parkin 2020). However, whereas these calls were organized around a general boycott of Christmas shopping, Powell targeted Santa

Claus specifically as ‘a white man’s invention’, imploring his congregation to think about whether they had ‘ever seen a black Santa Claus’. The preacher doubled down on these sentiments in subsequent speeches, repeating his contention that Santa Claus was a ‘commercial gimmick’ and calling for ‘black Santa Clauses with black armbands’ to picket stores across the country (Baker 1963).

Powell’s calls for picketing Santas quickly fell apart, but his vision would come to pass in states such as New Jersey, where a ‘Union of Negro Santa Clauses’ sought to combat the white Santa monopoly, and California, where ‘Negro, Mexican, and other ethnic Santas’ picketed a San Francisco department store in solidarity with striking agricultural workers (*Jet* 1967). In the Midwest, a local branch of the NAACP in Bloomington, Indiana, also utilized the Black Santa. In 1965, chapter affiliates entered a float in the city’s annual Christmas parade that featured local children, signs encouraging equal opportunity hiring, and a Black Santa Claus. While ‘onlookers of all ages received him well’, the Santa’s appearance prompted a response from Bloomington’s Chamber of Commerce, which decreed that only one (white) Santa was eligible to participate in the parade. The following year, NAACP chapter president Melvin Kennedy tested this ruling personally, manning a float dressed in a Santa outfit and carrying a sign that read: ‘Ho Ho Ho, Santa Rides Again’. After local police apprehended Kennedy’s float and blocked its participation, the activist, still wearing his ‘white whiskers and a regulation Santa Claus suit’, staged a march around Bloomington courthouse with several dozen supporters (*Chicago Tribune* 1966; Favoino 1966).

Through such performances and public declarations, we can see how multiple iterations of the ‘Civil Rights Santa’ emerged during the years following World War II. One version of the character, favored by more moderate civic and business leaders, was essentially conciliatory. It offered a way to address Black consumer demands and help to generate ‘good interracial feeling in the community’, whilst also preserving the economic and political power of the white establishment (*Atlanta World* 1955). It was this version that the city of Los Angeles turned to in the aftermath of the 1965 Watts riots, staging a Christmas parade through South Central headed by a Black Santa less than 6 months after it had been overrun with fires and National Guardsmen. One onlooker mused whether Santa himself would have been able to stop the riots: ‘it makes you wonder what things might have been like here if we’d had things like this last year’ (*Lincoln Star Journal* 1965). The other version of the ‘Civil Rights Santa’, the one favored by leaders such as Adam Clayton Powell, was altogether more combative. For these activists, the Black Santa was more than just a feel-good holiday character who helped children learn that Santa Claus ‘could be any color’ (*Battle Creek Enquirer* 1966). He was a means of drawing attention to entrenched white racism and generating support for social justice and labor rights.

A Black Power Santa

Two years after Bloomington’s NAACP chapter smuggled a Black Santa into the city’s Christmas parade, open housing activists in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, staged a protest headed by their own Black Santa Claus. However, whereas the Bloomington Santa had worn a familiar red suit with white fur trimmings and sported white whiskers, Milwaukee’s Santa appeared with ‘a brownish beard and a red trimmed black coat’

(*Leader Telegram* 1967). On an individual level, this sartorial shift tapped into the desire of Black activists to imagine a new and racially distinct Santa Claus that spoke directly and powerfully to Black constituents. Such efforts formed part of a growing and intentional effort by some African Americans to distance themselves from notions of a 'white Christmas' – an occasion that activists complained had for too long been just 'another time for the white man to get rich at the expense of the Black man' – and to embrace the concept of a 'Black Christmas' – a moment for Black people everywhere to 'give love [and] demand your rights' (*Milwaukee Star* 1967).

Several factors influenced this shift; not least continuing white resistance to the Black Santa. Although the character's visibility had increased during the 1950s and 1960s, many white business leaders and local officials continued to treat Black requests for Yuletide representation with a mix of confusion and annoyance. This included Bloomington Mayor Robert McGraw, who responded with exasperation to the parade fight with the local NAACP branch: 'I don't know what the Negroes are trying to start, there's only one Santa Claus' (Favoino 1966). Several years later in Cincinnati, Ohio, a prominent white-owned department called Shillito's adopted a similar line, arguing that 'a black face would be incongruous with the traditional Santa image' (*New York Times* 1969). Beyond alleged practical issues (some stores claimed that Black Santas were hard to find) such statements intimated that a deviation from the 'traditional' Santa carried potentially negative consequences, particularly for white children. These anxieties were made explicit by white nationalists, who saw such cultural battles as part of the broader struggle for racial supremacy. This included American Nazi Party leader George Lincoln Rockwell, who declared that 'Negro groups are actually agitating for NEGRO SANTA CLAUSES . . . Can you IMAGINE the effect of seeing YOUR little toddler on the knee of a BLACK Santa Claus?' (Rockwell 1967).

Handwriting over the psychological implications of the Black Santa for whites conveniently ignored how the same arguments could be applied to the barrage of white Santas facing Black children every festive season. After a spot-check of leading New York department stores, journalist Martin Gershen (1965) declared that 'Santa Claus remains as white as the snows of . . . the North Pole'. For Black activists such as Otis Moss Jr., a regional director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Black Santa's scarcity was another example of the limiting power of white expectations. In response to claims by white business leaders that a Black Santa would be 'incongruous', Moss contended that 'if a department store cannot conceive of a black man as a Santa Claus . . . it most assuredly cannot conceive of his being President' (*New York Times* 1969). Racial myopia underpinned American popular and media culture writ large, as acknowledged by the Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (1968). In a wide-ranging examination of the rash of 'long hot summers' that had engulfed America during the 1960s, the Commission argued that mainstream media coverage had exacerbated Black frustrations, misrepresented racial unrest, and failed to 'show understanding or appreciation of . . . Negro culture, thought or history'.

White intransigence fed a broader shift in attitudes and strategies by many Black activists in the wake of the 1963 March on Washington. By the mid-1960s, a new cohort of organizers was emerging, led by younger and more militant Black activists who were more inclined to follow the teachings of Malcolm X and other Black nationalist leaders over the guidance of moderate figureheads such as Martin Luther King Jr. The Watts

riots, which *Life* magazine (1965) denounced as a ‘cauldron of hate, arson and death’, shocked white liberals and demonstrated how the frontlines of the struggle for Black liberation was shifting from the South to urban centers in the northwest, Midwest and west. The following year, Stokely Carmichael’s calls for ‘Black Power’ at the Meredith March captured the imagination of Black activists and raised the hackles of white commentators and media outlets. Historian Peniel Joseph (2014) argues that Carmichael’s ‘Black Power’ speech on 16 June 1966 ‘transformed the aesthetics of the black freedom struggle and forever altered the course of the modern civil rights movement’.

At least initially, Carmichael’s use of the slogan was focused on expanding Black electoral power and political representation. However, the Black Power concept quickly became synonymous with more capacious demands for Black pride and self-determination, which stretched beyond the political sphere to critique the position and representation of Black people within American society writ large. This included popular culture, with the emergence of the Black Arts Movement, envisioned as ‘the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept’, calling for a cultural reckoning and a ‘radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic’ (Neal 1968). From this perspective, the rejection of the ‘traditional’ white Santa was not simply a question of representational politics, but a necessary challenge to an enduring symbol of white cultural hegemony and racial domination. As Otis Moss Jr. contended during his battle with Cincinnati’s department stores over their refusal to hire Black Santas: ‘we have uncovered the substance of racism by challenging one of the symbols of racism’ (*New York Times* 1969).

This sentiment was quickly taken up by organizers such as Jesse Jackson, a Chicago-based activist and the national director of Operation Breadbasket, the economic arm of SCLC. Following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in April 1968, Jackson was among a handful of Black activists who appeared likely to become the movement’s new figurehead (Deppe 2017). Eager to push SCLC in a more radical direction, Jackson turned to the Black Santa as a way of achieving this goal, believing that the character could become a seasonal spokesman for Black cultural pride and economic empowerment. This was most clearly demonstrated through a series of annual ‘Black Christmas’ parades held in Chicago. On the morning of the first parade in December 1968, thousands of Black Chicagoans braved frigid weather to line the streets of the South Side, where they were greeted by around 50 floats representing Black businesses and political organizations, Black celebrities and entertainers in cars supplied by Black franchisers, and several bands from local Black schools. At the head of the procession marched Chuck Jackson, a local truck driver, who distributed gifts and ‘messages of love, justice, peace, and power’ (Christmas 1968b; *Ebony* 1969).

Chuck Jackson’s Santa provides us with an instructive example of how Jesse Jackson and other Black activists sought to reinvent the character in response to shifting cultural and political expectations wrought by the Black Power and Black Arts movement. This began with his clothing, which continued the evolution seen during Milwaukee’s open housing marches of the previous year. Embodying the influence of Black cultural nationalism and the growing desire of African Americans to connect with the history and culture of the Black diaspora, the Black Santa at Chicago’s first Black Christmas Parade was dressed in ‘a dashiki of black velvet trimmed in red, gold and green’ (*Chicago Tribune* 1969). This approach would continue in subsequent years, where the Black Santa

wore 'a flowing African robe' and 'strings of green-and-red beads', and greeted onlookers not with a traditional 'Ho Ho Ho' but with the clenched fist of the Black Power salute. Through such gestures and clothing choices, Jackson and other organizers argued that this iteration of the Black Santa provided children with a positive Black image instead of the one forced upon them 'by a white society that fails to meet the psychological and historical needs of black people' (Christmas 1968a).

This was emphasized through a *Jet* editorial published shortly after the first Black Christmas parade in 1968. The first half of the article offered an 'obituary' for a white Santa, who was reported to have died after his true nature was exposed by Jackson and Operation Breadbasket. In his place emerged the Black Santa Claus whose role went far beyond providing presents at Christmastime. This Black Santa was visiting hospitals where Black people were being neglected. He was bringing picket signs to housewives so that they could protest stores that sold rotten produce to Black consumers. He was meeting with Black business leaders to champion Black economic autonomy, and with Black politicians 'to discuss political control of our neighborhoods for black people, not whites' (*Jet* 1969). He was visiting prisons to protest the racially disproportionate impact of mass incarceration and to reassure inmates that 'the black community has not forgotten them'. Through these and other roles, the Black Santa became the embodiment of demands put forward by leading Black Power organizations such as the Black Panther Party, whose 10-point-program for Black liberation included an emphasis on health care, housing, prison abolition, and 'an educational system that will give to our people a knowledge of self' (*Jet* 1969).

However, where Jackson and Operation Breadbasket saw the potential to reinvent the Black Santa as a Black Power icon, other Black radical activists believed that the character was beyond salvation. This included affiliates of the Nation of Islam, a Black religious and political organization that situated itself in the vanguard of the Black Power movement. The organization's influential weekly newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks*, printed multiple editorials during the late 1960s and early 1970s criticizing both the notion of the Black Santa, and the Black activists and business leaders who sought to champion its political potential. From the Nation's perspective, changing white Santas to Black ones did little more than change 'a white lie to a Black lie' (Muhammad 1969). Ultimately, this approach would do little to address the racial biases underpinning American capitalism, with the Black Santa representing little more than a new way for Black businessmen and white corporations to exploit the Black masses. To reiterate this point, *Muhammad Speaks* printed an editorial cartoon which featured a huge Black Santa Claus looking out towards a crowd with his arms outstretched. In his hollowed-out back hid a Black businessman, who was handing over a large sack of money to a pinstriped white executive (Woodford 1968).

From a similar perspective, whereas the Black Santa which appeared in Chicago's Black Christmas parades offered a Pan-African spin on Santa Claus, some activists believed that a true connection to the African diaspora could only be achieved by a wholesale rejection of Santa Claus and other staples of the white Western Christmas tradition. This included Maulana Karenga, a West Coast-based Black cultural nationalist and the head of the US Organization, a prominent Black Power group. In the aftermath of the Watts riots, Karenga unveiled his vision for Kwanzaa, an invested festive celebration inspired by traditional African harvest festivals. Karenga believed that Kwanzaa,

which he decided should take place in the week following Christmas Day, could connect Black Americans with their African roots and offer a viable alternative to white western holiday traditions. Rejecting this ‘traditional’ Christmas meant opting out of Christmas commercialism, and ‘certainly no acknowledgement of Santa Claus, reindeer, and other “white” mythological narratives’ (Mayes 2009). Other Black nationalist organizations such as the Institute for Positive Education in Chicago and the EAST organization in New York took up Karenga’s calls for Black people to ‘Kill Santa Claus, relive Kwanza[a], bring forth the cultural revolution’ (West 2020).

The Modern Black Santa

These approaches to the Black Santa demonstrate how Black radical activists struggled to define its meaning and significance during the peak of the Black Power era during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Like the many civil rights campaigners, social reformers, and African American entertainers who came before them, some Black Power advocates viewed the Black Santa as a useful symbol that could be shaped to suit their own beliefs and political agenda. Accordingly, Black leaders such as Jesse Jackson believed that the Black Santa could be reimagined as a spokesman for Black pride and community advancement (*Chicago Tribune* 1969). Yet for other activists during this period, the Black Santa was at best a distraction from, and at worst an impediment, to the ongoing struggle for Black liberation. Accordingly, for organizations such as the Nation of Islam and activists such as Maulana Karenga, it was only through rejecting, rather than reinventing the Black Santa, that African American communities could create lasting new holiday traditions and validate ‘their struggle for institutional independence and cultural autonomy’ (Mayes 2009).

However, beyond the realm of Black Power politics, mainstream debates about the Black Santa continued to be framed around questions of representation and multicultural inclusion. By the late 1960s, most white-owned businesses were beginning to realize that incorporating Black Santas into their holiday plans made sound commercial sense. In *The \$30 Billion Negro*, D. Parke Gibson (1969) reiterated the earlier findings of Joseph Johnson on the rise of the ‘Negro Market’ by emphasizing that Black consumers could make ‘the difference between profit and loss for many companies’. This reality prompted retailers such as Shillito’s in Cincinnati to change track, with a store representative announcing that it had ‘accepted the idea that Santa Claus could be portrayed by a black man’ (*Newark Advocate* 1970). Rather than choosing between a Black or white Santa, many retailers decided to employ both; leaving the decision of which Santa to visit up to children and their parents. This ‘separate and equal’ policy, whilst not without problems, reflected the growing willingness of white businesses to place profits about social prejudices. As one Manhattan retailer acknowledged: ‘we try to be traditional . . . but we end up mostly thinking about money’ (*Irish Times* 1972).

In turn, business leaders realized that Black people didn’t just want to see Black Santas in department stores or public parades at Christmastime; they also wanted to see him on the festive ornaments they owned and the gifts they gave and received. Greeting cards played a major role in this commercialization, with Black Santa cards becoming ‘big sellers’ by the early 1970s (Kaufman 1970). Such initiatives were not always successful, with the *Chicago Defender* relaying a story of one young Black woman who, upon seeing

a Black Santa-themed greeting card at a local store, had walked out disgusted. Such reports were a useful reminder that support for Black Santas within the Black community was far from universal. Nevertheless, it was increasingly clear that a viable market existed for Afrocentric holiday merchandise (*Chicago Tribune* 1988; Randolph 1975). These trends even stretched to Kwanzaa, which underwent a revival during the 1980s. While Kwanzaa had initially been conceived as a critique of American consumer capitalism, it subsequently gained wider acceptance through a commercial rehabilitation. This included the creation of Nia Umoja, a folk figure akin to a Kwanzaa Santa, who brought gifts to children and regaled them with African tales (Pleck 2000).

As the radical edges of the Black Power era were filed away and American businesses embraced Black consumers, a more commercialized and depoliticized version of the Black Santa achieved some measure of mainstream acceptance. Concurrently, the cultural dominance of the 'traditional' white Santa endured, with continued discrimination faced by Black Santa Clauses in department stores and public malls prompting a string of walkouts and lawsuits (*Jet* 1980, 1985). Industry gatekeepers such as Jim O'Connor, who ran a major Santa Claus agency, continued to prioritize 'real, bearded, white Santas' (Towns 1989). Some Black children, unfamiliar with anything other than a white Santa, were 'suspicious or even afraid' of Afrocentric alternatives (Duke 1991). In 1995, Black students at Vincennes University denounced the removal of a Black Santa figurine they had placed on campus as evidence of continuing 'racial unease' on a campus where African Americans accounted for just 5% of the college's total enrollment. Jalissa Hurd, the president of Vincennes' Black Student Association, argued that 'if they can't live with this Santa for two weeks, how do they live with us for nine months?' (Higgins 1995).

By the early twenty-first century, these lingering conflicts and interpersonal disagreements regarding the legitimacy of the Black Santa had been folded into the nation's ongoing 'culture wars'. Defined by scholars as 'a fundamental split between orthodox and progressive views of morality . . . [that] cuts across class, religious, racial, ethnic, political, and sexual lines', the modern culture wars in America were reanimated by a hardening of political and ideological divisions during the Reagan era (Thomson 2010). Patrick Buchanan, a conservative media personality and presidential candidate, helped to nationalize the term during the 1992 Republican primaries, where he rallied against issues such as abortion, feminism, homosexuality, and multiculturalism as existential threats to 'the Judeo-Christian values and beliefs upon which this nation was built' (Buchanan 1992). Following the September 11 attacks and the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, as conservative activists became obsessed with defending 'traditional' values at both home and abroad, the 'War on Terror' converged with a so-called 'War on Christmas'. *Fox News* anchor Bill O'Reilly led the charge, arguing that efforts to diversify or reinvent Christmas traditions were part of larger plan to advance 'gay marriage, partial birth abortion, euthanasia, legalized drugs, income redistribution through taxation, and many other progressive visions' (Robertson 2021).

For liberal commentators, the rise of the Black Santa, along with other feminist and ethnic alternatives to the 'traditional' white Santa, was a testament to the nation's embrace of multiculturalism and the politics of representation. Black Santas offered a positive racial image that allowed Black people to feel fully part of the nation's holiday traditions. Many Santa impersonators shared these sentiments, such as Willie Veal, one of three Black Santas working in the Atlanta area, who argued that 'it

means a lot to the kids to see someone like themselves’ (Parker 1993). From this perspective, the Black Santa represented a happy alignment between cultural diversity and democratic capitalism – a symbol of a United States in which Black demands for cultural representation were welcomed and could be addressed through the interventions of the market. This belief can also be traced through advertisements for Black Santa-themed merchandise on the pages of Black periodicals, where Black businesses and white corporations alike offered a range of products ‘designed and styled to meet the needs of . . . African-American consumers’ (*Ebony* 1991, 1993, 1997).

By contrast, many conservatives saw the Black Santa as symptomatic of liberal sensitivity on any topic related to race. These sentiments underpinned the backlash to Aisha Harris’s call for America to ‘ditch Santa the old white man’ (2013). Thus, liberal dogma could not obscure the ‘reality’ of the Santa’s ‘true’ racial identity, and represented ‘the knee-jerk instinct by so many to race-bait and assume the worst in people’ (*Fox News* 2013). Yet this dismissive approach was itself instructive – revealing anxieties about America’s perceived cultural decline. From this perspective, the Black Santa was not a feelgood example of multicultural inclusion, but part of an ongoing attack on the traditional values and perspectives that underpinned American Christmastime and, by extension, American society. Several years after Megyn Kelly’s contention that ‘Santa just *is* white’, news that the Mall of America had hired its first Black Santa garnered sparked fresh controversy. When the Minneapolis-based *Star Tribune* covered the story, the newspaper was forced to close its online comment section after a flood of abuse (Sawyer 2016). Other media outlets such as received similar reader accusations of ‘political correctness gone to[o] far’ and racist mockery of ‘alternative’ Santas that blended antiblackness with Islamophobia: ‘[why not] have a radical Muslim who hates America and the western world play Santa . . . when the little Christian children come sit in his lap, he can cut their throats’ (Lampen 2016).

While such comments are among the most extreme articulations of ongoing resistance to the Black Santa, they can be understood as merely the latest additions to a long and hotly contested history. In different guises, the Black Santa has functioned as an emblem of white supremacy, a vehicle for racial uplift, an arbiter of racial goodwill, a symbol of civil rights protest, a Black Power icon, a spokesman for commercial interests, a champion of multicultural inclusion, and an exemplar for cultural decline. As a welcome reinvention of, or a dangerous attack on, one of the nation’s most cherished holiday traditions, the Black Santa continues to be a touchstone for broader debates about racial politics, cultural inclusion, consumer capitalism, and national identity in the modern United States.

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Notes on contributor

E. James West is a Lecturer in Arts and Sciences at University College London and Co-Director of the Black Press Research Collective at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. He is the author of three books, including *A House for the Struggle: The Black Press and the Built Environment in Chicago* (University of Illinois Press, 2022).

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