Blackface, ‘purple face’ and blackface again

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Two female students from the Stellenbosch University (US) were accused of donning blackface after a photo of them, covered in white paint, circulated in the media on Friday 5 February. It was later discovered that the women actually wore purple paint to look like aliens for a dress-up party, and that the photo uploaded on Instagram had a filter applied.

Open Stellenbosch (OS), a student movement at the US, called on the university to “expel the two students with immediate effect”. The movement later retracted their statement, said that the images were misleading and admitted that “this was not, in fact, a case of students dressing up in blackface”. They apologized to the students involved. On 9 February, OS deleted their apology on Facebook and issued a new statement yet again. They admitted that the colour of the paint was indeed purple, but maintained that “it would be naïve for a white student to upload such a picture without reasonably foreseeing the possibility of it being perceived as blackface”. OS stressed the fact that the “incident took place in the context of the current racial tensions in the country”. The women involved have been suspended while the situation is under investigation.

Flip Buys, chairperson of the Solidarity Movement, says that “if students paint themselves black out of racist considerations, then they have to bear the consequences. In this situation however, it is clearly not the case.” He comments that in a democratic society there is no place for heartless racism, but there is also certainly no place for a totalitarian enforcement of political correctness. He describes the suspension of the girls as a “form of political blackmailing and social thievery against two defenceless girls”. According to Buys, the action taken against the girls is not about what they did, but about who they are and what the university is amounting to.

Blackface is makeup used by performers to represent a black person. It denies black people and causes for negative stereotypes to develop and live on.

Prof David J. Leonard from the department of culture, gender and race studies at Washington State University says that blackface is part of a history of dehumanisation.

According to Leonard, blackface is never a neutral form of entertainment, but a way of creating harmful stereotypes.