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Racism is Alive and well in Canada

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The recent staging of blackface at an institution of higher learning in Montreal is disturbing to say the least. But it can serve as a potent reminder of the ongoing legacies of racism and racist cultural practices against blacks in the west – and yes, this includes Canada. As a professor of (amongst other things) Canadian Art History, I can state unequivocally that there is a profound deficit of knowledge of Canada's racist past amongst university-aged students in Canada. When I introduce topics like the vast visual culture of Transatlantic Slavery to my mainly white Canadian students (mostly aged 18 to 21) the majority of them initially engage the materials exclusively from a perspective of American and Caribbean slavery. Indeed, it is always a moment of shock when they learn that Canadians, (French, British, and others) for centuries also enslaved peoples of African and indigenous descent. How then has the thirty-one year period (1834-1865) of the Underground Railroad, (a moment which commemorates Canadians as the saviour of African-American enslaved people fleeing northward to freedom) taken on such mythic status in our national consciousness, while the centuries-long history of slaving in the "Great White North" has been almost universally forgotten? The answer, though complex, can be summarized as follows; Canadians have a knack at off-loading their colonial histories of racial marginalization and exploitation onto their southern cousins, the United States.

The events at Hautes Études Commerciales (HEC), as many other events in the recent and distant past, should alert us to the fact that racism is still alive and well in Canada. In one fell swoop, this student performance actually maligned various groups on the basis of race, nationality, religion, language and culture. The students not only vilified and marginalized black people in general by "blacking up", but also took underhanded

swipes at the entire nation of Jamaica (carrying the flag and wearing the national colours), while criminalizing blacks as pot smokers (chanting “smoke more weed”), ridiculing Jamaican patois (chanting “yeah mon”), equating the use of marijuana in the religious, spiritual and meditative practices of Rastafari with getting high and partying for the hell of it and finally, some even wearing hats with fake locks attached (a problematic appropriation of a black hair aesthetic). It is hard to believe the students’ and university’s initial explanation that the group’s dress and behaviour was meant to honour the Jamaican Olympian Usain Bolt. Could they not have honored Bolt dressed as themselves, white students? And if Bolt had been on campus that day, would they really have greeted him dressed in this manner and behaving in this way?

Indeed, although minstrelsy and its related practices like blackface are most often associated with the United States, this once widely-accepted form of popular culture did exist in Canada also (as well as Europe and other locations). A part of the problem is that the histories of minstrelsy in Canada have yet to be written. Traced to the early nineteenth-century, minstrelsy involved a layered public theatrical performance, which included various forms of racist humour, singing, and dancing. However, the mainly white male performers (often of marginalized or so-called undesirable white groups like Jewish and Irish men) often performed in blackface, applying a dark black paste to their faces and deep red lipstick. In this guise, the whites of their eyes were dramatically apparent and the distinction between their *real* white bodies and the *fake* black make-up acted to cartoonishly emphasize the difference between their whiteness and the black masks that they had donned. Minstrelsy celebrated a white nostalgia for black enslavement. It is no accident that minstrelsy reached its peak only after slavery had been abolished. Indeed, the types of songs, dancing, and the supposed comedy of the performances hinged on a compulsive recitation of the assumed inferiority of blacks and often violent fantasies of the murder, torture, and dismemberment of black people’s bodies. Of course, this all helped to bolster ideas of white supremacy.

Whether or not the group of HEC students knew explicit details of the history of minstrelsy, it is difficult to imagine that they did not know that “blacking up” in 2011, could be construed as inappropriate and racist behaviour. Students are voracious consumers of popular culture (television, streaming, internet etc.) A quick glance at any of these media would tell you that images of blackface have been all but banned from the mainstream public domain. The old Hollywood movies where famous white American movie stars regularly donned blackface are almost never screened on television anymore, nor are the older versions of blackface cartoons like Bugs Bunny and Tom and Jerry. The supposed ignorance of these students prompts questions about who is *allowed to be ignorant* of shared histories of colonialism and racism.

Indeed, one could argue that minstrelsy “benefited” white people, by advocating white superiority through the compulsive performance of what white people claimed not to be – black. Ironically, it is the white privilege of the HEC students which allows them, and the university spokesperson, to claim that their actions should not be construed as racist due to a lack of knowledge. But one could argue the opposite, that the lack of knowledge that this type of spectacle is wrong is a perfect example of racism. Surely

racism is not only a matter of intent. If our measure of racism is based solely on what people *meant to do*, the harm that people *meant to cause*, then we choose to ignore the impact of the racist acts upon its victims.

Anthony Morgan, the law student who bravely filmed the HEC events, had to suffer (along with other black university students, staff, and faculty) the humiliation of seeing himself mis-represented as a black man and as a Jamaican. The negative message that this performance sends to the black population of the university should not be underestimated. The white students who chose to don blackface, eventually went back to classes and sat down beside their black fellow students, listened to lectures delivered by their black professors (although there are very few), checked out library books handed to them by black library staff, and ate meals in campus restaurants served by black cafeteria staff. Their utter disregard for the impact of their performance on the well being of the black members of their shared university community is telling. It speaks of a type of racial narcissism and privilege which allows white students to either not see, not recognize or not give a damn about the black, people of colour or indigenous peoples with whom they share the space of the university and broader communities.

Lest we dismiss what happened at HEC as an isolated incident, we should be reminded of the blackface debacle that took place during Halloween at a Legion Hall in the town of Campbellford, Ontario last year. Unbelievably, the first prize was awarded to a pair of white men, one of whom wore a Ku Klux Klan costume with a confederate flag draped on his back and the other in blackface with a noose around his neck. The direct references to the American Civil War and the heinous practices of lynching made this spectacle particularly vile. Lynching was a prolific practice in the American South, one through which countless African-Americans (mainly males) were terrorized, tortured, mutilated, violated, dismembered (even castrated), and often burned, often while still alive. But back to university campuses, here and in the USA, there is also a rising trend in “gangsta,” “hip-hop,” or “ghetto” parties at which white university and college students have been congregating in blackface, “tricked out” with “bling” even going so far as to pad their backsides in a disturbing parody of black anatomy. This resurgence of minstrelsy performance seeks to degrade blacks. Clearly black students are not welcome at such parties unless they consent to being the punch line of a violent racist joke.

It is unsettling that a popular cultural form that supposedly died in the mid-twentieth century is making such a strong comeback. It is fitting that we ask why, and why now? Is this not the age of Obama (the first black president of the USA), of Michaëlle Jean (Canada’s first black Governor General), of Yolande James (Quebec’s first black female MNA), of the likes of a Michael Lee-Chin, Oprah Winfrey, Colin Powell, and Condoleezza Rice? But perhaps minstrelsy never died out at all. However, I see the public resurgence of blackface and minstrelsy as a racist push-back against precisely these types of gains and accomplishments. There is indeed a specific type of racism reserved for high-achieving black people. Middle and upper class blacks - people with education, credentials, good careers, and money – often encounter a unique form of racism. It is what I like to call “how dare you?” racism. “How dare you be more educated than me?” “How dare you make more money than me?” “How dare you assume

a position of power and leadership over me?” Back in the day, the epithet *uppity-negro* was used by racist whites to describe upwardly mobile blacks.

It should perhaps be even more upsetting to us that blackface is making a come back amongst young, educated whites. What does it mean that university and college-educated young adults are engaging in these acts? Well for one thing, we need to rethink the simplistic idea that racism is more abundant amongst older populations and non-existent amongst our youth. Furthermore, we need to ask if “education” is a cure for racism. Clearly education in general is not. In fact, the type of Eurocentric education that is proliferated in the Canadian curriculum, methodologies, theories, course materials and resources of the majority of university disciplines is precisely what perpetuates the racist ignorance and racist behaviour of students like those at HEC. The current state of diversity policies of Canadian universities, many of which are strategically unenforceable and unenforced, also contribute to the current racial exclusion of black people, people of colour, and indigenous people on Canadian university campuses, especially as faculty and upper administration. The policies help to propagate the idea of Canada as a race-blind, multicultural state, one that does not really need to engage with the issue of racism, since racism is supposedly not a problem in Canada.

As disturbing as it is, the HEC incident can act as a wake-up call to Canadians and a starting point for a broader public discussion. The university’s initial reaction was woefully inept and an attempt to downplay the incident as innocent fun; a shining example of how racism is typically “managed” in Canada. However, the increased international media attention has rendered their earlier response untenable. The question is, what will they do now and what should be done about the students who engaged in this act? Should they be expelled from the university altogether, should they lose a semester of study, should they be forced to make a formal apology, should they be made to do community service at one of the many black cultural institutions in Montreal; a way for them to actually spend time with and get to know some of the black people and Jamaicans whom they ridiculed that day? What about the university’s diversity policies and procedures? Why weren’t there sufficient checks and balances in place that ensured that this blackface idea never made it to the level of a public performance? While I am disturbed by the fact that this blackface performance took place, I am pleased at the critical, international media attention that it has spawned. For in Canada, this is surely a long overdue and worthwhile conversation.