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## The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts has Whitewashed Jazz Music

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A former student reminded me that the *Colours of Jazz* art exhibition, a show featuring the 1920's modernist art of the Beaver Hall Group, was about to close at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. As the Canadianist in my Art History Department, entrusted to teach historical Canadian art, I felt obliged to make the effort. While the title left me pondering how Jazz might fruitfully enter the exhibition and open new avenues of critical analysis, the promotional materials, which included a portrait of a pale-skinned, dark-haired white female, gave me pause. To what extent did the conspicuous whiteness of the chosen model indicate the whitewashing of Jazz in the show?

Although not a connoisseur, I know enough about Jazz to understand that its roots lie indisputably in black diasporic, mainly African-American, musical and expressive cultures which can be traced to earlier forms of creolized slave cultures. As my frustrated friend expounded on Facebook after seeing the MMFA poster, the history of Jazz is "black-blackety-black!" Jazz stood for modernity in part because of its unofficial or extra-official nature, which was imbedded in practices like improvisation, but also fundamentally, born when slavery's memory was still very fresh, the exuberant, transgressive, performative, uncalculated nature of Jazz allowed black musicians to reclaim self-expression and cultural practices which had been suppressed by slavery. But the ongoing stain of anti-black racism and the practices of segregation meant that superlative black musicians and dancers were often performing for all white audiences in racially segregated nightclubs. This is no doubt what prompted some Jazz greats to forsake (North)America altogether and migrate to Europe, especially Paris, where one of the Jazz Age's brightest stars, the African-American Josephine Baker, reigned on Parisian concert stages. The segregation of social life, in the USA and Canada helped to ensure the continuation of the colonial logic of race, which had underpinned slavery in the first place. Thus, although the legal enslavement of blacks had been abandoned, white

insistence on the racial uniformity of their social spaces ensured the continuation of their racial privilege and helped to perpetuate the idea that the role of the black artist was to perform for the benefit of whites.

Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* (2013) got it right. There is a disturbing scene in the movie where Patsey, played by the Oscar-winning Lupita Nyong'o, along with her fellow enslaved people, are forced to arise from their slumber to entertain the inebriated and maniacal Master Epps, played by Michael Fassbender. White slave owners often compelled the enslaved to "make merry" and perform for the benefit of the white households. Across the Americas, the enslaved were routinely rented out to white households who paid their owners for the privilege of their musical talents.

Just as in Harlem, NYC, Jazz became indelibly linked to Montreal during the early to mid-twentieth century. As a city free of prohibition and close to the US border, Montreal attracted top black American Jazz acts and ardent white American Jazz tourists. But local whites also frequented such clubs and local Jazz talent, the likes of Oscar Peterson, Charlie Biddle, and Oliver Jones, also emerged.

It is with this history in mind that I entered the exhibition. While the organizers took pains to lay out the background and chronology of the Beaver Hall Group, "Jazz" and its social and cultural history never made an appearance. In a show dominated by portraits, an admittedly vibrant, stunning, and accomplished ones, I failed to find even one black sitter. While a range of genres including landscapes, nudes, and genre works were included, even Prudence Heward's provocative black female nudes (naked) were absent; to my mind a missed opportunity to talk about the racial politics that underpinned the Jazz age. While claiming to narrate the social complexity of modernity as it intersected with and was inspired by Jazz in a city which was for a long time Canada's economic capital, the absence of black subjects was a profound error which arguably falsified and retroactively whitened the cultural landscape of the period and the city of Montreal itself.

Despite the lack of established black Canadian artists at this time when compared to the US, the organizers arguably could have addressed the centrality of black culture in other ways. Popular culture like newspaper clippings of jazz shows, photographs of musicians and dancers, record album covers, playbills, and concert tickets could have easily opened a window into the complex social world of Jazz in which the titillation of cross-racial contact was, for white concertgoers, a big draw. Therefore, the lack of established, classically trained Canadian black visual artists could have been addressed as a facet of Canadian racism, which was also self-evident in the racially segregated Jazz scene.

But not only was this dynamic "modern" context withheld, but also the majority of the paintings failed to evoke the context and *mood* of Jazz modernity; the smoke-filled, often dingy, out of the way, in-the-know, night-life of Jazz music, the sky-scraper-lit-against-a-night-sky vibe of a moody, haunting, trumpet melody. Cityscapes are rare in this show, and I don't recall seeing one set at night. Instead, snow-covered hills and trees

in rural settings dominate. In the one “moody” dark room where you finally as a visitor heard Jazz music, the song that was playing (at least when I was visiting) was one of the *whitest* Jazz songs that I’ve ever heard! Thus, in the end, an exhibition that promised Jazz and modernity did not deliver. Indeed, Jazz as I understand it, did not show up at all. As someone with a knowledge of and appreciation for Canadian art, it was a pleasure to see the striking portraits, nudes, and landscapes of Lilius Torrance Newton, Prudence Heward, and Adrien Hébert. However, the organizers must be held to account for whitewashing their own Jazz theme, especially with Concordia University’s Jazz Archive within spitting distance, their proximity to the living legacies of Canada’s *black* Jazz greats, and their location in Canada’s greatest Jazz city, Montreal! An opportunity was surely missed.