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Canadian Blackface, Canadian Slavery, Canadian Denial, and Trudeau

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The recent resurfacing of images of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in blackface and brownface has made international headlines. For many, a part of the shock is the way that the images, widely seen as racist or at least outdated, do not align with his much-celebrated rhetoric of inclusion. Unusual for a nation which routinely bills itself as both colour-blind and racism-free, Trudeau has instead stood out from his predecessors by acknowledging Canada's colonial history and our ongoing problems with systemic, institutional racism.

By 7am on Thursday morning my phone started "blowing up" with various interview requests from Canadian, British, and American media outlets looking for people who could interpret the unfurling debacle. As the only black art history professor in Canada and an academic who specializes in Transatlantic Slavery and the representation of black people in western art and popular culture, I am better positioned than most to explain, not only what blackface is, but where it came from, why it is so deeply hurtful to many black people, and why we can't seem to get rid of it. Canadian race politics too require special interpretation since they are not at all transparent or coherent, either to Canadians or foreigners.

To understand blackface one must understand Transatlantic Slavery, because the latter gave birth to the former. Around the mid-nineteenth-century as slavery was ending in the United States, public theatre performances known as minstrelsy emerged. Minstrelsy combined singing, dancing, instrumental music, and comedy, but it also entailed the cross-racial and cross-gender performances of mainly white males who performed blackness through slave stereotypes. Not content to merely dress as enslaved people, minstrels also blackened their faces with a mixture of burnt cork and water creating masks which did not and were not supposed to approximate the real complexions of people of African descent. Instead the tar-black colour when combined with red lipstick served to highlight the whiteness of the eyes and render black bodies as grotesque. When combined with jarring, clumsy, and brutish movements, the message was clear, blacks were supposedly savage beings who were better off in slavery. The songs developed for the genre appropriated and bastardized African American musical culture and instruments like the bongo to create nostalgic laments through which performers mourned the end of slavery. Comedy – or what passed for it – routinely included violent jokes about lynching and violating black people.

In the media landscape of the past week, too many Canadians have dismissed Trudeau's behaviour as an American import with no connection to our nation which supposedly had no

history of slavery. Wrong and wrong. Minstrelsy was wildly popular and in the nineteenth-century professional minstrel actors and troops quickly found an audience in Canada. The practice also had a pervasive impact on the leisure activities of white Canadians who saw blackface as a fine way to celebrate family or institutional milestones whether in private or public domains. Since Canadian Slavery is little known, acknowledged or understood both inside and outside of the nation, we have not yet begun to study how the plight of enslaved black people in temperate climates was appropriated, scripted, and performed in Canadian minstrelsy.

On Sunday, September 22nd, 2019, when Wendy Mesley, the host of CBC's 24-hour news program "The Weekly" asked the Quebec City radio host Éric Duhaime why the French response to the Trudeau images did not register more outrage, he responded that it was in part because Canada had no history of slavery. But neither the other guest, Wendy Mesley, or by implication, the producer(s) in Ms. Mesley's ear, caught or addressed his egregious error. The denial of the existence of Canadian Slavery is, like the customary denial of the harm of blackface minstrelsy, Canada's default position which helps to enshrine the lie of a racism-free, colour-blind state. While denying slavery serves to evacuate the centuries-long presence of blacks in the nation, positioning all of us instead as recent immigrants, the downplaying of the harms of minstrelsy erases the ongoing pain of racial marginalization and instead mainstreams the white response as the only valid "Canadian" response to these repeated blackface offences.

Whereas most mainstream American institutions have long relegated blackface to the dustbin, significant French Quebec cultural institutions have refused to relinquish it with very recent incidents causing little to no upset amongst the white francophone population (or media) in the province. In 2013, the white comedian Mario Jean did a blackface impersonation of the black comedian Boucar Diouf at Le gala Les Olivier, a French language comedy award show televised on Radio Canada and in 2014 the francophone Le Théâtre du Rideau Vert staged a year-end comedy review which included a white male actor in blackface impersonating the superstar black Canadian hockey player and philanthropist, P. K. Subban. When called upon to explain her decision to include blackface in the review, the artistic director Denise Filiatrault dismissed the objections by stating that the skit in question was only 12 seconds long and concluded that such a short duration did not merit the hiring of a black actor. That black actors, Indigenous actors, and actors of every race, colour, and ethnicity should have been – by 2014 – permanent members of her cast, seems to have been completely lost on Filiatrault.

With a close federal election race underway, it is unclear if Trudeau's blackface and brownface history will harm his re-election bid. Certainly we must weigh these incidents against his actual political record and the harms that will be done by a return to the right and a Conservative party that has rarely acknowledged or sought to redress Canada's colonial histories or ongoing racist present. But while the "unwokeness" of Trudeau's adolescence is more understandable, his brownface in 2001 is far harder to explain. The latter occurred at a moment when the vast archive of cinematic blackface had already been unanimously censored from our television screens and his position as a twenty-nine-year old teacher meant that he should have been ensuring that his students did not show up at the school function in brownface, as opposed to doing so himself.