3 Defending Blackface: Performing the “Progressive,” Postracialist Canadian

This chapter further examines mainstream blackface discourses, this time based on the study data from print and electronic articles reporting on Canadian blackface incidents in mainstream media outlets, relevant campus newspapers, and letters to the editor since 2005. It pays particular attention to the sometimes thoughtful, occasionally openly racist, and usually unguarded reader comments associated with online articles. The chapter is based on themes generated from the data about the various ways that blackface is justified in the articles and especially the reader comments. Here, I am interested in learning more about the discursive juxtaposition of these defences of blackface with hegemonic understandings of what it means to be Canadian, and in particular the claim to Canadian progressiveness – all of which typically attend public debates about blackface in Canada. I use the term “progressive” here to refer to the claim to Canadian racial egalitarianism that is actually quite a conservative discursive position because of its relationship to Canadian postracialism, which will be discussed further below. I also use the term “subjectivity” (rather than, say, “identity”) to indicate the ongoing constructed, always unfinished, nature of subject positions – the ways in which social subjects continually struggle to establish and re-establish themselves as particular kinds of persons.

In the chapter, then, I demonstrate that the presumption of Canadian racial egalitarianism frames debates about blackface in Canada, but that it is largely mobilized in defence of blackface rather than in opposition to it. I argue that blackface and the logics undergirding its

defence are forms of racial consumption through which ostensibly pro-
gressive Canadian subjectivities are secured. This progressiveness is
a claim to a racial transcendence that feels it therefore need not care
about causing racial offence to Black people, and thereby signals the
ways that Canadian progressiveness is constituted by antiblackness.
Contemporary blackface discourses in Canada are therefore postracial-
ist in their ability to juxtapose racist expression, generated within rac-
ist structures, with claims to having overcome racism (e.g., Cho, 2008;
of Canadian national mythologies that are partly constructed through
revisionist understandings of the nation’s relationship to Blackness,
and against an ostensibly more virile racism in the United States. This
Canadian self-concept requires a collective national amnesia not only
around Canada’s history of blackface minstrelsy, but also around the
broader constitutive antiblackness of the Canadian settler-colonial proj-
et. Overall, by analysing blackface in the context of nationalist postra-
cialism, this chapter clarifies what is at stake for Canadians who partici-
pate in defending contemporary blackface, and helps us to understand
how both blackface and unexamined Canadian claims to an inherent
egalitarianism are trotted out against Black critique, and thus perpetu-
ate antiblackness in Canada.

Blackface, Racial Consumption, and the Production
of White Subjectivities

In the previous chapters, we saw that blackface is an appropriation of
the Black body, and that its humour depends upon notions of Black-
ness as ontological Otherness and a problematic association of Black
people’s bodies with white pleasure. This humour dynamic is only one
form of a broader phenomenon of racial consumption – which has been
defined as interacting with race through consumerism – “a wide variety
of practices that involve our engagement with a range of objects, prod-
ucts, services, stories, images, texts, styles, spaces and places” to “make
and remake meanings” (Pitcher, 2014, p. 3). According to Pitcher, racial
consumption is always a means to “‘say’ something about ourselves and
others” (p. 5).

Two examples might demonstrate how contemporary blackface in
Canada does this consumptive work of telling us “something about
ourselves and others.” In an incident portraying characters from the
film Cool Runnings, the blackface wearers reported: “This movie played
a large part in our childhoods, and we simply wanted to express our
feelings towards it with realistic costumes, which in this case included
skin color” (Mahoney, 2009). Here, Blackness, signified through altered skin colour, is central to, and sufficient for, expressing nostalgia and memorial.

Likewise, in a blackface incident that Patrick at University 7 describes, we see this generative consumptive dynamic at work as the blackface wearer explains his motives:

[The blackface wearer] has kind of like a higher voice and ... the [party] theme was “What I would like to be.” He would like to have a deeper voice, so when he thought of someone, he thought of Barry White. ... And again, word for word ... this is what he would say [to me]: “I wanted to be Barry White and the only way I can show people that I am Barry White is to show that I am Black.” (U7S1)

For this blackface wearer, the fantasy of having a deeper voice could be realized without singing, without a microphone, without a piano, music, or lyrics to Barry White’s songs – none of which he employed – but rather through appropriating Blackness through blackface. Similar to the Cool Runnings incident above, and as with the impersonation of Bob Marley in the previous chapter, darkening the skin is integral to accomplishing the meanings the wearers desired.

Of course, the “something” that is said is always a racial “something.” Contemporary blackface consumes Otherness – in this case Blackness – to achieve ends for which the mobilization of Blackness is indispensable.

Racial consumption is historically informed by a colonial ambivalence that makes Blackness both abject and object of desire (hooks, 1992a; Roediger, 1999). It is also informed historically by journeys across racial boundaries into racial space, and accounts of these journeys, whereby white subjectivities are constructed – for both travellers and their audiences (Kirby, 1998, p. 49; Phillips, 1997, p. 59). Thus, here I further define the notion of racial consumption to refer more specifically to the phenomenon whereby white subjects fetishistically engage Blackness (as they imagine it to be) to do the work of self-making – that is, to discursively construct their subjectivities (hooks, 1992a; Watts, 1997; Yousman, 2003). hooks (1992a) refers to this as “eating the Other.” As we saw in the previous chapters, wearing blackface, its transitory “touristic” nature, and the minimal effort to appear authentic all make the blackface wearer feel more white (where white is taken to be synonymous with Human), and contemporary blackface wearers, like nineteenth-century minstrels (Roediger, 1999, p. 117), secure their subjectivities by making it clear that they are not really to be mistaken for Black.
It is not only those who wear blackface who reinforce their subjectivities through blackface performances. Blackface enjoys the approval and complicity of others who are not directly involved, but who repost pictures on organizational websites (e.g., Benedictson, 2013; McGill Daily, 2012), vote and award (sometimes monetary) prizes for “best costume” (e.g., Benedictson, 2013; Dempsey & Allen, 2010; Mahoney, 2009), and vociferously defend blackface and its perpetrators in the myriad subsequent discussions taking place in person and in the media. This broad-based participation, involving those wearing blackface and those who do not, has historically attended blackface minstrelsy and its identity-making potential. Many minstrel troupes consisted of the “endmen” and the master of ceremonies, “Mr. Interlocutor.” The endmen (armed with blackface, garish attire, and malapropisms) along with Mr. Interlocutor (sometimes not in blackface, wearing formal coat and tails, and speaking with “genteel” dialect) (Lott, 1993, pp. 140, 264), worked together to provide the contrasts through which they and their audiences could know themselves. Participants in discussions about contemporary blackface in Canada are similarly able to construct progressive Canadian subjectivities without wearing blackface, as I shall argue. Signalling this, I refer to discussants who justify contemporary blackface as “interlocutors” to highlight both the discursive aspect of identity-making through blackface and their complicity in co-constructing white subjectivities through Blackness in a manner analogous to the role of the historical Mr. Interlocutor.

**Constructing Progressive White Selves**

Theories of whiteness, rooted in Black scholarship (e.g., Baldwin, 1966, 1984; Du Bois, 1920; hooks, 1992b; Morrison, 1992), have established the ways in which white subjectivities are crafted in opposition to Blackness. More recent scholarship on whiteness has critiqued the ways in which this process is still at work even when the attempt is ostensibly to construct non-racist white subjectivities (Frankenberg, 1993; Howard, 2004, 2006; Lomax, 1966; Moon, 1999).

While the subjectivities secured through historical blackface minstrelsy were more overtly white supremacist (Lott, 1993; Roediger, 1999, p. 118), more recent forms of racial consumption often engage Blackness with a view towards reinventing whiteness as progressive, as critiqued by several scholars (hooks, 1992a; Tate, 2003; Yousman, 2003). For example, since the popularization of hip-hop beyond Black communities in the 1980s, racial consumption has been discussed largely with respect to white youth’s engagement with Black popular culture. In this context, while not ruling out the possibility of a patent will to dominate in some
instances, and while indicating the always already deeply colonially informed motivations involved in racial consumption, bell hooks (1992a) suggests that white youth at the time of her writing sought out consumptive racial experiences in an effort to forge trendy, non-oppressive, white subjectivities. Ostensibly dissatisfied with the social relations of racial neoliberalism, they saw these experiences as acts through which they might dissociate themselves from the racism of their forbears and the implicit norms against social interaction across colour lines. They came to know themselves as racially progressive white people, even while there was no actual social transformation or commitment to contest antiblack social structures (hooks, 1992a, p. 24; Tate, 2003, p. 5; Yousman, 2003).

Similarly, while they act out of the socially embedded association of the Black body with humour (as argued in the previous chapter), it appears that those who participate in contemporary blackface in Canada may not always deliberately set out to cause racial offence (though undoubtedly some do!). Instead, they act upon a naive assumption of racial camaraderie, in a context where race ostensibly no longer matters. This is suggested by the warm feelings towards Black celebrities claimed in the name of tribute, and through their involving Black and other non-white participants\(^1\) in their blackface performances (CBC News, 2014b, 2019; Mahoney, 2009). Of course, to say this is not to deny the normalized antiblackness (sometimes rendered unrecognizable as such to the wearers) at the heart of contemporary blackface and the social order that produces it. Thus, more salient than the intentions of blackface wearers are the ways that they and other Canadians make sense of blackface incidents after the fact such that notions of colour-blind Canadian progressiveness and antiblackness coincide, leaving in place a logic that justifies blackface and that ignores Black objections.

**Egalitarian Blackface?**

The presumption of friendly, even-handed, interracial humour occurs in defences of blackface, as, for example, where the following online interlocutor suggests that racial cross-dressing occurs equally in all directions, and on equal terms, for the sake of fun:

> What these guys did was NOT stupid, was NOT insensitive and was NOT a racial statement of any type. How many white people used a Barac [sic]

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\(^1\) The involvement of non-white persons in blackface is a complex phenomenon that I analyse further in Chapter 8.
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Obama mask this year? How many people dressed as Mexican’s [sic] and made their skin darker to legitimize the character they portrayed? How many Black people used a George W. Bush mask? It’s 2009 and this is behind us (as a society). What these guys did was try to have fun and portray characters from a funny movie. (User Rob, Comment on Urback, 2009)

As we begin to see in this repeated insistence upon what blackface is not, the progressiveness (“this is behind us as a society”) claimed in relation to contemporary blackface in Canada is simultaneously strikingly impudent and unapologetic. Consider, again, this even more impudent comment from a blackface wearer: “So is it now offensive for a white person to dress up as a Black person? I dress up as jimi hendrix every halloween, … you mor(on)s2 are taking this race garbage way too far. DUMMY-UP!” (User Pink, Comment on Myles, 2014). This white blackface wearer asserts their ostensible right to do so, while simultaneously insulting the intelligence of those who understand blackface as racist. Interlocutors also adopt this insolent tone, which is directed primarily at Black objectors, as in this instance:

And why can’t Black people look at this with some objectivity and common sense? … Can a white guy wear a LeBron James jersey or better yet FUBU? Can a white guy buy a Lil Wayne album AND sing along to it in his car? (User Andre, Comment on Urback, 2009, emphatic caps in original)

Unable to critically assess the way that their not being Black informs their own opinions about blackface, this interlocutor unselfconsciously accuses Black people who object to blackface of being blinded by their Blackness. Equating blackface with engagements with Black popular culture, and levelling all forms of racial consumption without regard to historical context, they forcefully defend white people’s prerogative to wear blackface as they see fit.

Similarly, dismissing objections to blackface as much ado about nothing, another interlocutor defends the right to blackface and racial costuming while suggesting that blackface provides an opportunity to educate ostensibly ignorant Canadians:

This sniffe offense is overblown bigtime, slow news day on a campus that has lost its voice in free expression. I suppose we aren’t supposed to ever

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2 It is unclear what this commenter means by the unusual punctuation of the term “mor(on)s.”
see a geisha either. Instead of creating controversy, this was a great opportunity to share some sensitive history to a largely uninformed Canadian public. (User In Vancouver, Comment on Urback, 2009)

Finally, in a response to a blackface portrayal of PK Subban, another interlocutor insults those who object to blackface and writes their objections off as political correctness:

Oh please. Get over yourselves, you losers. I’m sure the fan meant no harm, and in fact cares more about PK than any of you politically correct posers. I know PK personally. The fan did nothing wrong. I am offended by PC. blackface? Not so much. (UserSvg, Comment on Myles, 2014)

These responses, then, reflect an impunity associated with contemporary blackface in Canada. Both participants and interlocutors impudently and unapologetically reject objections to blackface, particularly where mounted by Black persons. What stands out here is the contrast between this impunity – promoting an insolent, cocky whiteness – and the more tentative and deferential subjectivities of the racial consumers of whom hooks wrote in 1992, whom hooks and others writing in that decade (e.g., Giroux, 1997; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998) argued acted out of a self-conscious whiteness in an effort to rearticulate hegemonic whiteness.

Yet I reiterate here that this unapologetic impudence coincides with a performance of racially progressive Canadianness. Thus, while one interlocutor defended blackface, he also presumed an ostensible racial awareness that would have allowed him to “share sensitive history to a largely uninformed Canadian public” that, evidently, does not include him (though to what end is not clear, given his defence of blackface). Similarly, in another excerpt we are exhorted to accept a “fan’s” presumed regard for Subban (exhibited through a blackface “tribute”), along with the interlocutor’s professed personal relationship to Subban, as evidence of interracial amicability and the impossibility not only of racial intent but also of racial harm. In both cases, the interlocutors are claiming to be politically savvy and racially progressive, but here being racially progressive is not concerned with disassociating from dominant whiteness or from racist expression. Instead, in the context of contemporary blackface in Canada, progressiveness is understood as being so beyond the race question that one is now freed from worrying about causing racial offence, from any need to consider the salience of racial location to social perspective, and from the need to take seriously the objections of Black people. In fact, this
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This suturing together of unapologetic racial/racist expression with a sense of having transcended race is a key feature of postracialist discourse (Goldberg, 2015, p. 72; Howard, 2014a), which I argue defines performances of, and debates about, contemporary blackface in Canada. Not to be misunderstood as being truly beyond race, postracialism is “a certain way of thinking about race, and implicitly of racist expression ... [that] has been giving way to novel understandings, orders, and arrangements ... The postracial ... is a neo-raciality, racisms’ extension if not resurrection” (Goldberg, 2015, p. 24). Postracialism acts from the presumption that race is no longer socially significant, that racism has been overcome, and that anti-racism is gauche. Cho (2008) distinguishes postracialism from colour-blind ideology, which works by setting up behavioural ideals appropriate for a utopian moment of racial transcendence yet to come. Colour blindness claims not to see colour (i.e., race), and fails to account for the histories and extant conditions that differently locate variably racialized social actors in the present. In contrast, postracialist ideology makes the claim that the moment of racial transcendence is upon us – already manifest and fully established – precipitated by a specific watershed event (Cho, 2008, pp. 1597–8). Postracialism enjoins us to

give up on race before and without addressing the legacy, the roots, the scars of racisms’ histories, the weights of race. We are being asked to give up on the word, the concept, the category, at most the categorizing. But not, pointedly not, the conditions for which those terms stand. (Goldberg, 2009, p. 21)

This silencing of race while racial arrangements endure is, then, a technology of whiteness engineered to do away with race on the basis of its spuriousness, with the intention of casting racism as similarly spurious, and thereby doing away with the bothersome task of addressing it (Cho, 2008, p. 1596; Goldberg, 2009, p. 22). Postracialism “levels the discursive playing field” for white people, no longer recognizing the racial progressiveness can even insult and ridicule Black people and their perspectives. Canadian racial progressiveness claims interracial friendship on terms that ignore history, insist that the racist tropes it bandies about have no racial meaning, and thus reveal its constitutive antiblackness.
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salience of the experience of racial oppression for defining and identifying racism (Cho, 2008, pp. 1594–6), and thus necessarily rejecting Black critique.

As Goldberg (2012) argues, postracialist conditions where race becomes unnameable (that is, where race has disappeared) produce the “dis-appearance of race,” whereby racist incidents erupt in unanticipated and sometimes ambiguous but usually crude and objectionable ways (p. 125). Goldberg writes:

Racial disappearance … signals both the conceptual evaporation and the material unrecognizability of racial matters … racial dis-appearance speaks to the ways in which racialities re-appear in sometimes unexpected, perhaps unpredictable and less noticeable ways once race conceptually dis-appears. (p. 125, emphasis in original)

The lean towards unapologetic, “progressive” postracialism in Canada is partly attributable to temporal context. hooks’s (1992a) article was written prior to the post-9/11 debates that crowned a snowballing conservative backlash, and prompted a more bold assertion of whiteness in North America. Certainly, there was a revision of Canadian identity post-9/11, at which time, in mainstream discourse, “Canadianness” was redefined in civilizational terms, highlighting solidarity between “Western” nations and asserting a transnational whiteness (Arat-Koc, 2005). Thus, the aggressive defence of contemporary blackface in Canada may be a part of dominant whiteness globally asserting itself self-righteously against race-conscious analyses and social correctives.

Yet I suggest that the Canadian relationship to postracialism and the consequent impudent whiteness in the discourses of contemporary blackface in Canada are more complex than can be properly understood through a solely temporal analysis. I argue here that Canadian postracialism is characterized by its roots in a national claim to egalitarianism that is partly forged through an ostensible contrast to American racism, as well as through its professed relationship to Blackness. I contend that it is this Canadian subjectivity that is at stake in the defence of blackface.

The claim to Canadian racial transcendence is a recurring feature in discourses of contemporary blackface in Canada. For example, one online interlocutor writes:

The whole race issue needs to be put to bed. We are all people just trying to make it in the world. Both sides make fun of the other. The US has a Black
Things have changed. Look at all of the interracial relationships these days. One day we are all going to be the same color. (User *Halloween Costumes*, Comment on Urback, 2009)

According to this interlocutor, “we” can retire race (that is, anti-racist critique) and accept blackface as harmless fun to lighten a life that is (equally) difficult for everyone, all because “things have changed.” This comment is postracialist because even as it defends racist expression, it claims to inhabit a moment after which social transformation has occurred and in which Canadians are no longer differentially located through processes of racialization; where Blackness no longer marks one for dehumanization. This interlocutor asserts an unproblematic “we” – the universal, non-raced (but implicitly white) liberal Canadian subject – whose knowledge and experience is not informed by power differentials, but who rather is a good-natured egalitarian “just trying to make it in the world.” The same claim to racial transcendence is made in the following, with specific reference to Canada:

This [blackface] debate is just outdated. ... Most kids in Canada are now growing up in increasingly multi-cultural environments which just forces them to throw out the entire notion of “the other” because they are forced to see past race. Also it is worth to mention [sic] that so many Canadians are a mixture of different racial/ethic groups and this blurs the definition of “race.” ... This is not 1960 ... We need to stop mentioning “race” in order to make it what it is: irrelevant. (User Jess, Comment on Urback, 2009)

Here, it is explicitly Canadianness, and the racial/cultural mixing that ostensibly characterizes it, that make race and anti-racist critique irrelevant.

To be sure, these claims are temporal in part. One interlocutor refers to being beyond 1960, the other to being in the Obama era. Nevertheless, the way that postracialism is mobilized precisely through Canadianness – explicitly in the latter comment, and implicitly in contrast to the United States in the former – is conspicuous. Though the first interlocutor seems to offer the election of President Obama as a postracialist watershed event, Canadian national narratives generally claim much earlier watershed events, naming variously the declaration of a state policy of multiculturalism (Alvarez & Johnson, 2011) as implied by the second interlocutor, but more poignantly for the present discussion, the abolition of slavery in pre-Canadian British North America prior to its abolition in the United States so that the Underground Railroad had destinations here. We see this in the cautionary
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remarks of a blackface participant who now comments under photos of the event on YouTube:

Many people do not realize that Canada was one of the first nations to abolish slavery, in fact many proud Canadian families escaped the United states for that very reason … I can’t say we haven’t had our own problems with such racism, but historically speaking. We were a safe haven during the civil war and many many years before that. If you find this hard to believe i recommend you look into “The Underground Railroad.”

(User DeltaImmortal, Comment on HueyFreeman222, 2007)

Post-race discourse in the United States in the Obama era, therefore, perhaps influences but certainly does not initiate Canadian postracialism. In fact, through the identification of a watershed event that occurred even before Canadian confederation, postracialism and Canadianness merge, and Canada becomes synonymous with the transcendence of antiblackness. According to this comment, the fugitives’ resistance to American slavery secures their “proud Canadianness” even before arrival, and implies further that upon arriving in the space that is now Canada, they joined a pre-existing community of (white) Canadians who also abhorred slavery. Canadianness and racial progressiveness are thus fused. This narrative forgets the inconvenient facts of the short duration of the Underground Railroad, that emancipation throughout the British empire was based in expediency rather than moral epiphany, and that the racist conditions fugitives from slavery experienced in Canada provoked many Black “proud Canadians” to return to the United States after 1865. Instead, the story is spun so as to turn the pragmatic motives of the developing ruling class in pre-Canada into anti-slavery. By their appropriation and revisionist narration, then, Blackness and Black experience are vehicles through which Canada claims its postracialism. This is part of a broader Canadian tendency. As Cooper (2006) writes:

Black history [in Canada] has less to do with Black people and more with white pride. If Black history narratives make whites feel good, [they are] allowed to surface; if not [they are] suppressed or buried. (p. 8)

Thus, unlike in the United States, what is at stake in Canadian blackface debates, and Canadian postracialism more generally, is not simply personal integrity and moral character but, in fact, the entire weight of national identification and consciousness. The anger and impudence towards Black objectors that shows up in blackface discussions is
animated by an entrenched presumption that Canada is a refuge from antiblackness. Continuing to feel good about being Canadian depends on it.

**Blackface, Canadian Postracialism, and Knowledge Production**

The knowledge-producing implications of Canadian postracialism in this context are twofold. First, blackface must be ahistorically known as anything but racism. For example, consider a comment after a blackface incident portraying Olympian Usain Bolt from an interlocutor who claims to be of mixed race. For them, blackface is simply a harbinger of a happy, mixed-race future – a positive sign that Canadian youth have “moved on,” racially innocent in a world that is not yet ready for their forward thinking:

I would like to hear from the students involved, it would be no surprise if they already assumed solidarity of all this planet[sic] people and were stunned and horrified to have hurt the very track star they admire. I bet they are remorseful for the hurts they caused inadvertently – unlike [the Black whistleblower] who likely won’t get the hurt he is causing until his own pale grandson climbs on his knee painted up with dark make up and says “I love you Grandpa. I wish I looked more like you” … Mockery in the spirit of fun and cross cultural solidarity for all Canadians regardless of colour(s). (User beigface, Comment on Hannaford, 2011)

Here, instead of steering clear of blackface in light of its disreputable historical roots and manifest potential to racially retraumatize, Canadian nationalistic progressivism rather authorizes blackface, transforming antiblack mockery into racial egalitarianism where not a positively regarded historical ignorance taken as innocence. Black critiques that suggest the existence of antiblackness in Canada strike at the heart of hegemonic ways of knowing the Canadian self and therefore cannot be heard because the national progressive identity depends at least partially upon a particular narration of Canada’s relationship to Blackness.

Second, given the miscegenation theme in this comment, and the typical postracialist reversal whereby the “real racist” is the person who objects to blackface (Cho, 2008, p. 1595; Goldberg, 2009, p. 79), Canadian

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3 Importantly, these dominant constructions of Canadianness are bought into largely by white Canadians, but also by many racialized Canadians who respond with just as much indignation.
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Postracialism accomplishes its exclusions and helps the nation to know who can really be Canadian. If Canadianness is synonymous with good-natured naivete, then those, like the Black whistleblower above, who interrogate Canadian blackface’s antiblackness are, by implication, ingrates whose Black consciousness makes them not quite Canadian. Ultimately, to be recognized as Canadian requires giving up on a critique of antiblackness, and eventually giving up on Blackness altogether through an apparently inevitable racial mixing that will nevertheless always regard Blackness as the butt of the joke. Here it becomes clear, again, how Canadianness is constituted in opposition to Blackness, in ways that always already make its belonging in Canada impossible.

Denying Canadian Blackface History

I have argued above that discourses of contemporary blackface in Canada reveal a Canadian postracialism that juxtaposes racist expression and racial transcendence. It is worth noting that in many contemporary national contexts, postracialism displays no need to argue away such stark contradictions; their racist logics and racial injustice proliferate while the irrelevance of race is simply stubbornly insisted upon (Goldberg, 2015). While racist logic and racial injustice certainly proliferate through Canadian postracialism also, its entanglement with a progressive national subjectivity comes with unique contradictions that must continually be managed at the risk of falling out of Canadianness. Here, I look at the ways that defending Canadian progressiveness vis-à-vis the United States in blackface discussions requires a national amnesia around Canadian blackface history.

As a “middle power” located just north of the American “superpower,” Canada struggles to define itself as different from the United States. Canadian identity has therefore long been conceived through hyperbolic binaries that produce it as not-American (Seiler, 2002, p. 53) even while claiming the United States as its closest ally, and while participating with it in transnational whiteness. One of these binaries has to do with how Canada purportedly deals with race. Canada understands itself in its national mythologies as having always been more accepting of Black people and of cultural and racial diversity, enshrined finally in its federal multiculturalism policy, and contrasts itself to America’s supposed emphasis on assimilation (Seiler, 2002, p. 55) if not outright racism.

Yet Canada and the United States are both white settler colonies embroiled in ongoing colonial relations that include an intractable antiblackness (Day, 2015; J.S. Simpson et al., 2011). In practical terms,
then, and in the ways that Blackness is lived day to day, the race-based distinction between Canada and the United States proves to be grossly exaggerated – Canada, for example, demonstrating disproportionate rates of Black (and Indigenous) death at the hands of unaccountable law enforcement like the United States (D. Cole, 2020; Nangwaya, 2013; N. Simpson, 2020). Nevertheless, Canadian progressiveness is famously constructed vis-à-vis American racism, and the Canada-US border ostensibly represents the frontier of racial tolerance. Given this Canadian fantasy, postracialist statements such as that of an interlocutor quoted earlier saying that “the US has a Black president” take on new meaning. Such a statement does not position the United States as a leader in racial egalitarianism, but rather serves to intensify Canada’s always already incontestable racial transcendence by indicating that racial egalitarianism has now finally spread even to the United States.

However, the Canadianness produced through this fabled relationship to the United States (and Canada’s mythical relationship to Blackness) is necessarily in tension with Canadian blackface and the whiteness secured through impudent blackface discourse. This tension must be negotiated carefully so as to hold on to both aspects of Canadianness, hence the constant need to juxtapose defensive impudence with performances of racial progressiveness. We see this strategy again in the following interlocutor’s remarks:

I question if people have gone too far with this issue. I understand where the BSU [Black Student’s Union] is coming from. At the same time, I saw enough white males dressed as Tiger Woods/The Jamaican Bobsled Team. I personally didn’t find it offensive. At the same time I’m a white male, who considers himself politically uncorrect. I think this has become more of a cultural issue than anything. It seems the right to parody an ethnic or minority group has become a cultural norm within today’s society. Is this right? No. Does racism still exist[?] It seems to have transcended to a new form thanks to North American media and youth culture. (User Alex, Comment on Urback, 2009)

The ambivalence in this response is striking. The interlocutor performs a progressive awareness of racism (“I understand where the BSU is coming from”) while, in typical postracialist fashion, supplanting this embodied Black critique with his own embodied white perspective (“I personally didn’t find it offensive”). He lays proud claim to being “politically uncorrect,” defends blackface, and sees those who challenge it as overreacting (“I question if people have gone too far with
these tensions are nowhere more evident in blackface discussions than where they involve the history of blackface itself. Hegemonic Canadian blackface discourse consistently locates blackface minstrelsy historically in the United States rather than Canada. Thus, in the wake of a blackface incident, a McGill campus newspaper article states that “blackface was a form of theatrical makeup popularly used by minstrel performers in 19th century America to popularize cruel stereotypes of Black people” (McGill Daily, 2012, emphasis added; see also Lightstone, 2014). However, minstrelsy was very common throughout Canada into the 1970s (Le Camp, 2005). Travelling American minstrel troupes were welcomed in Canada, revealing the Canada-US border to be, in fact, quite porous to US-style antiblackness. Moreover, several home-grown professional Canadian blackface troupes such as the Saskatoon Minstrels and the Ardrossan Snowflake Amateur Minstrels (Le Camp, 2005, pp. 371–2) existed. Blackface was a favourite form of Canadian entertainment for local amateurs at fundraisers, and state institutions such as schools and police forces, and community groups such as churches and charitable organizations, all regularly staged minstrel shows (Le Camp, 2005, pp. 327–9).

The Canadian tendency to deny Canadian minstrelsy is particularly pronounced in Quebec (Canada’s francophone province), where interlocutors use the politics of Quebecois identity vis-à-vis English-speaking Canada to distance themselves even further from racial culpability. As an online interlocutor states unequivocally, as though fact: “The blackface taboo is not historically rooted in Québec. Québec didn’t have minstrel shows or the like” (Montpetit, 2011). Invoking cultural unfamiliarity, a student at a Quebec university struggles to understand the objection to blackface in this response to an incident on her campus:

I wasn’t aware of anything. You know, in my head, it’s so innocent, you know. It is not a part of my culture … I do not have this baggage, so I try to translate how I’d feel. (translated from French by author)4

These denials also do not hold up to scrutiny. Blackface was a part of popular culture in Quebec, featuring such shows as “Belle Davis et

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4 Some of the interviews I conducted were at francophone universities and/or with francophone participants. In some instances (as here), I indicate a translation but do not indicate the university; in others I indicate the university but do not indicate that the excerpt has been translated. These measures are taken to preserve participant anonymity as much as possible.
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ses nigrillons” (Le Camp, 2005, p. 358); and the composer of Canada’s national anthem, the Quebec-born Calixa Lavallée, toured the United States and Canada as a blackface minstrel (Thompson, 2015).

In order to maintain the pivotal notion of Canadian racial progressiveness, these claims about blackface in Quebec and Canada are presumed, and asserted confidently without any appeal to evidence or any sense of a need to do so. In this, discourses of contemporary blackface in Canada demonstrate yet another characteristic of postracialism – the “denial of denial” (Goldberg, 2015, p. 75). As Goldberg writes of the postracialist:

I assert my (non)racial, my postracial innocence not just by denying that I any longer, or ever, make (or made) racial reference or mobilized racist exclusion; I now further deny that I am in denial. I can’t possibly be racist now because I never was then … I can’t be in denial because – tolerant then, as now – denial was never an issue. (pp. 74–5)

In efforts to balance the aspects of Canadianness that are in tension, hegemonic Canadian blackface discourse both denies the history of blackface and glibly denies that there is anything to deny.

These contradictions are further heightened to the extent that Canadian blackface discourse does not unconditionally absolve all blackface. Canadian racial progressiveness is produced through the assumption that minstrelsy was not an issue here. The implicit suggestion is that, by contrast, where blackface occurs in the United States it is intolerable given the history of minstrelsy there. Ultimately, the Canadian denial of the denial allows it to unselfconsciously indict contemporary blackface in the United States while celebrating the contemporary Canadian version in order to recuperate progressive Canadianness (vis-à-vis the United States) that is threatened by critiques of Canadian blackface. This tortured self-congratulatory but self-incriminating logic demonstrates the profound pedagogical effects of postracialism operating at the level of national consciousness, through which being Canadian makes it impossible to know national racial history and the history of antiblackness in Canada.

Nevertheless, the denied history of Canadian minstrelsy has much to offer for understanding its contemporary counterpart. Minstrelsy in the United States was of two strains: first, that perpetrated by immigrant and working-class whites attempting to work out their place within a racial hierarchy (Lott, 1993; Roediger, 1999), and second, that performed by elite whites to discipline Black people whose social mobility marked them as “out of place” (Breaux, 2012). Historically, Canadian
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blackface most resembles this second strain, while the smaller proportion of Black people in Canada made the imperative to put Black people back in their place less of a factor. Lorraine Le Camp’s (2005) study of Canadian minstrelsy demonstrates that blackface was well entrenched among the Canadian elite, and that watching and participating in minstrelsy was a way for white families and communities to bond across the social spectrum (p. 314). Blackface performances were defended as a nostalgic tradition at such educational institutions as Upper Canada College in Toronto in 1888 (p. 302) and Waterloo College (currently Wilfrid Laurier University) in 1949. Blackface also aired annually on state-run Canadian Broadcasting Corporation television (p. 307).

Blackface later became less publicly acceptable only in response to sustained resistance from Black Canadians, and even then was only reluctantly attenuated in the public sphere (Johnson, 2017; Le Camp, 2005, pp. 309–13) as a “generous” concession to Black people that included expressions of regret that people just don’t seem to understand the ostensible non-racist roots of the practice (Le Camp, 2005, p. 308). Thus, what was recognized in the United States as an effective means of reminding Black people of their place (Breaux, 2012) was defended historically in Canada simply as innocuous, non-racist entertainment.

Contemporary blackface incidents and debates in Canada are remarkably similar to those of the early twentieth century when we recall that contemporary blackface in Canada is also popular at educational sites (often elite) and in official entertainment channels, and is justified as harmless fun and interracial camaraderie despite Black objection (CBC News, 2014d, 2019; Dunlevy, 2016; Mahoney, 2009; McGill Daily, 2012; Montpetit, 2011). This blackface history, which is reproduced in contemporary times, further highlights the well-established relationship between white Canadian subjectivities and the problematic terms upon which Black people find themselves included in Canada, despite claims to the contrary.

Conclusions and Implications

Analysing Canadian blackface and progressive white Canadian subjectivities as postracialist reminds us of the symbiotic colonial relationship between racial fetishization/fascination as found in contemporary blackface and the foundational white supremacy of the Canadian settler-colonial context. It helps us better understand the ways in which these Canadian subjectivities act as significant barriers to what can be known about antiblackness in Canada. In Canadian blackface discourse, the fantasy of racial transcendence, especially vis-à-vis the United States,
occludes any careful, historically informed analysis and enables the ongoing racial-colonial project here – one that includes a pointed antiblackness. This analysis can also help us to rethink the effects of this contradictory dynamic on knowledge production around social justice. The contradictions within white subjectivities, and specifically in blackface, have often been regarded as at least potential sites of anti-racist promise (e.g., C.M. Cole, 2012; Lensmire & Snaza, 2010; Lhamon, 2012). Whatever the (dubious) merits of such arguments, it seems that these contradictions have not so far produced anti-racist results on a broad scale; instead, contradictions have largely been resolved in ways that sustain white supremacy. An analysis of these contradictions as postracialist suggests that they are not slippages in racist discourse, but rather a constitutive part. Further, in terms of promoting anti-racist change in whites, it is worth noting that the impudent responses in blackface discussions are characteristic of anonymous online comments and discussions taking place in largely white spaces. They are quite different from the rare but more apologetic responses made by blackface wearers in instances where Black communities have mobilized to hold them publicly accountable (e.g., Mahoney, 2009), affirming that effective Black resistance is more pedagogically promising and socially transformative than white contradiction. Thus, I am more inclined to regard the contradictions of blackface and Canadian ostensibly egalitarian whiteness pedagogically not as anti-racist openings, but rather as red flags calling Black communities and our allies to sustained or enhanced challenges to the antiblack terms upon which Canada discursively establishes its progressiveness. The struggle crucially continues!