SOIRÉES ÉTHIOPIENNES: BLACKFACE CULTURE IN QUÉBEC

Dorothy Williams, Ph.D., is a historian who specializes in Black Canadian history. She has authored three books, and has contributed to other scholarly and academic publications. Both her demographic study (Blacks in Montreal) and her in-depth historical narrative (The Road to Now) take the reader along a journey that illuminates nearly 400 years of settlement and contribution in Quebec.

With an eye to the south, tales of the 1850's are rife with examples of positive sentiments and actions from Montrealers stepping up to support anti-slavery in the United States and fugitives' liberty within the Canadas. Still, as the Civil War took hold, the city's social and economic segregation ramped up, fervent aspirations, waned quickly in the 1860's as the Civil War propaganda took its toll on the continent.

What were Quebecers saying about Blacks before the Civil War? Writer Gay tells us that much of Quebec literature was mirroring the poetic sentiments of, Charles Lévesque,'s *L'esclavage: poésie anacréontique*, designed to evoke brotherhood, and strong empathy for Blacks:

> *L'esclavage : poésie anacréontique*
> *Ah! Le nègre gémit entre leurs dures mains!*
> *Au milieu de la paix, plus méchants qu'à la guerre,*
> *Ils spéculent sur lui par d'horribles moyens –*
> *Tuer, sans faire mourir, un semblable, un frère!*

Translated:

> *Ah! The Nigger groans under their hard fists!*
> *In the midst of peace, meaner than during war,*
> *They speculate about him, in horrible ways –*
> *of how to kill him without causing death*
> *To kill, but not to kill, a brother like him.*

So, what happened to change this plea for empathy? The Civil War carnage had overwhelmed as hundreds of thousands succumbed to disease, while an estimated 620,000 soldiers died. Everyone was depressed, appalled, and looking to blame. Who? Blacks! Negrophobia enveloped Canada. In Montreal, thus, the nadir of anti-black racism began which was to continue right into 1950s.

Canadians, like Americans, resorted to ridicule and disdain by way of the blackface minstrelsy. Though Americans blamed Blacks they still needed cheap labour to enrich themselves and to rebuild. So, instead they characterized, in caricature blackface, Blacks' lack of intelligence, and initiative, i.e., laziness. And so, between 1875 and 1899, blackface became the stock form of black denigration.

Even before the Civil War, blackface and minstrel shows were being used to counter abolitionist ideas of the industrious, black man. Because minstrelsy depicted happy backs (loving their servitude on the plantation) --the minstrelsy begged the question: why would Blacks want freedom? And more importantly, how could anyone consider Blacks as equal to whites?

PLANTATION MINSTRELSY

In its earlier form, the minstrelsy was performed by Blacks with no need for blackface, for these were plantation slaves summoned to perform in front of guests or for family entertainment. They were not paid. They were told to sing and dance in these impromptu shows demonstrating to guests, be

they Northerners or southern neighbours, that the plantation slaves were happy-go-lucky. Slaves could sing and dance, play instruments and smile and they were not being abused, whipped, forced or worked to death. Thus, for decades, plantation minstrel shows tried to justify Black enslavement. This form, to the best of my knowledge, did not propagate in Quebec.

BLACKFACE MINSTRELSY

Then, one White enterprising entrepreneur, Thomas Dartmouth Rice, made millions from the blackface routines he saw on his travels. Soon, others followed. Eventually, minstrelsy became the routine night entertainment in the United States, dominating entertainment for decades. The blackface minstrel show became the people's form of opera-everyone knew the act that was coming.

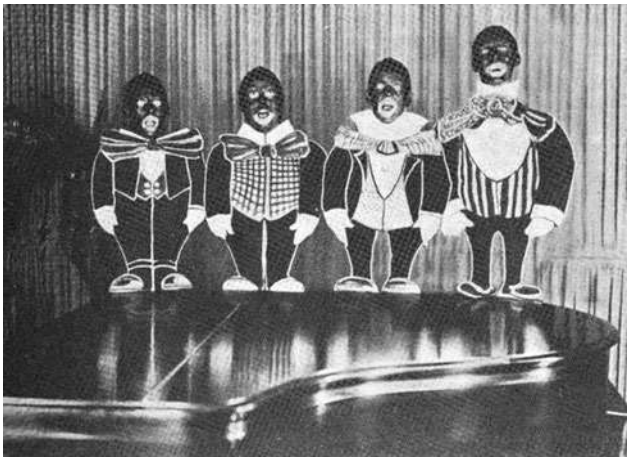
The minstrel shows' formulaic aspects were deliberately degrading, and like a Shakespeare play, there were known roles, and timings, with a set introduction, a dénouement and a grand ending. Regardless of the troupe or the theater, the three elements remained.

The first featured the *Tambo and Bones* skit that played off the strait-laced host. Then the first set ended with a line dance or cakewalk. Performers danced, played instruments, did acrobatics, and other amusing talents in the second act. Then one endman delivered a faux-black-dialect *stump speech*, or a long oration about anything from nonsense to science, society, or politics, during which the stupider blackfaced character would try to speak eloquently, only to trip over malapropisms, countless jokes, and unintentional puns. This obvious stupidity reinforced the idea that even when Blacks expound on the matters of the day, on science, on great questions, they talk gibberish and offer nothing worthwhile to listen to or consider.

Depending upon the era, the third set ended with parodies of classic plays that blackface actors would totally ruin, demonstrating that Blacks can't act nor do they have a clue how to interpret classic theatre. There would either be a series of slapstick skits or the ever-popular scenes of blackface whites depicting the sorrow of a by-gone era, pining for the good old days of Black enslavement, forever reinforcing the ingrained belief that Black people were better off enslaved.

BLACKFACE IN QUEBEC

Like America, Québec artists who could exaggerate mannerisms and language gestures, facial expressions and the black gait were hired to represent certain aspects of the black person. Unlike America, many Quebec artists had never met a Black. These representations came from fertile imaginations, from Quebec literature or shared stories of encounters with Blacks. Quebec's minstrel shows depicted these standard blackface characters: *le noir comique*, *le noir voleur*, *le noir menteur*, *le noir craintif*, *le noir superstitieux*, *le noir libidineux*, *le noir violent*...



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The environment that created minstrelsy also supported the rise of white French transvestites and male cross-dressers who in blackface were hired to play stock figures on stage: the high yellow woman, or the dark-blue black mammy or the chocolate-temptress. Whites also costumed themselves to look like monkeys, sometimes with bulging genitals and monkey tails. All this to ridicule and to reinforce the belief of black inferiority, of hyper-sexualization and of the African's closeness to animals in lineage and instinct. Further, these caricatures highlighted over, and over again, Blacks' supposed, genetic lack of intelligence, their farcical, comic behaviours and exaggerations, and Blacks' penchant for laziness. The point was to get White people to laugh at Blacks and not to take them seriously.

Like the States, Montreal's environment was no different. Montreal laughed at Black caricature. Hamall's Serenaders was a blackface minstrel troupe founded by Hugh Hamall in Montreal in 1867,

Minstrel historian, Lerue writes, "Ethiopian shows were instituted in Québec specifically to fill a role, that is to strongly exploit racist sentiments and feelings of superiority among the public and... they were composed of both francophones and anglophones and were all the rage in the 1860's and 1880's in Montreal."

Montreal's Blackface minstrel shows played in venues for all classes and languages: L'Institut des Artisans, L'Institut canadien, Le parc Sohmer, Théâtre Royale, L'Académie de

musique, Mechanic's Hall, Nordheimer's Musical Hall, and Théâtre Français.

"Quebec-type" minstrel shows went under various promotions: "spectacle nègre", "ménestrels", "soirées éthiopiennes", "spectacle de ménestrels" or just, the minstrel show. The moniker did not matter. Shows featured the typical minstrel characters of blackface skits, the racial humour and the musical recitations of the slave, the dandy, the mammy /old sambo, the old darky, mulatto wench, and the black soldier.

"Quebec-type" minstrel shows tried to, even without the personal experience of American style plantations, re-create that good old Dixie feeling about the longing for the plantation. These shows were popular, and the stereotypes generated by Black lampooning, caricature and denigration were integrated in Quebec's 19th century culture, regardless of language.

This home-grown blackface minstrelsy had its favourites, such as traveling troupes like, Les Nouveaux ménestrels and La Troupe Coffin or Hamall's Serenaders, or the Black Crook. These Montréal groups became quite the rage, even in rural Québec. Though most of the audience might not have ever met a black person, the audience understood that the show was expected to create a certain Black buffoonery and ridicule. In fact, if a performer was not exaggerated or in caricature enough, rumours would fly that the actor was actually Black, and not proper in the show.

The public attitude was so insistent and persistent, that the troupe directors felt obliged to reassure their ticket-buying audience. The directors put out notices or pamphlets to declare that: 1) every single actor is a white person with blackface, 2) they are of high reputation and are interpreting their role, 3) the actors are not Black. This worked. They knew that had there been Black performers, Whites would not have come to their performances.



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Being Black would have been disastrous for the troupes, thus paintings and sketches of performers becoming white again, served a purpose. This painting of "Members of The Burnt Cork Fraternity" depicts "Hogan & Mudge's Minstrels in their comicalities" washing up after performing blackface at the Théâtre Royal-Côté. This 1872 image was just the thing to convince audiences that whites, who are washing up, were in blackface.


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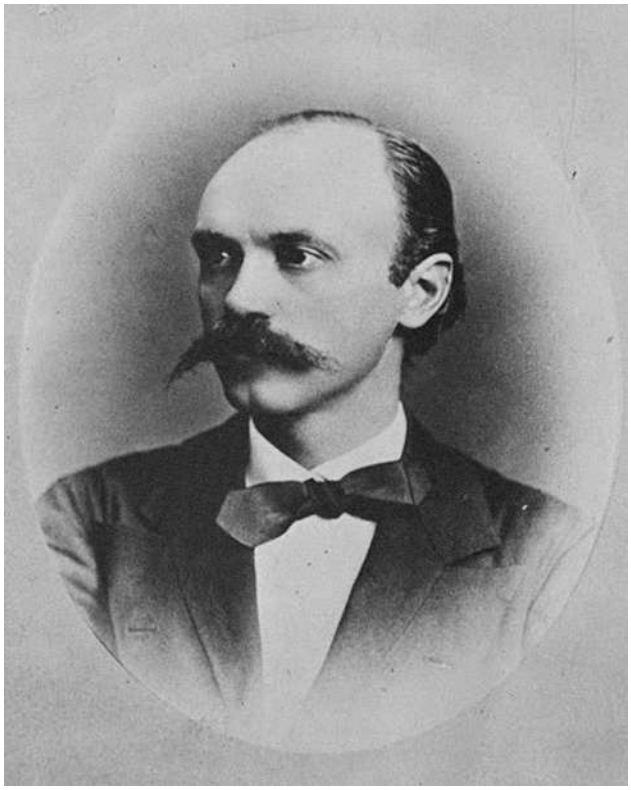
To show how "normal" blackface was in the province, Calixa Lavallée the composer of O Canada, spent years in American blackface minstrel troupes and performed in Quebec City and Montreal. Calixa had other forms of performance opened to him, but in the U.S., Blacks who were musically-inclined often had no other form of music they could perform in, so by the 1880's African-Americans either created their own minstrelsy or joined White troupes – not the case in Montreal.

Over time, jazz, the cabaret, vaudeville and even burlesque overtook the fascination with minstrel shows, but minstrelsy never really died in popular culture or as a form of entertainment. For instance, in the waning years of blackface minstrelsy in the province, during World War II, the YMHA



Calixa Lavallée – Archive

minstrels performed for soldiers stationed in Quebec and translated one of their shows into French. Blackface still goes mainstream despite black protest and despair. For example, at Radio-Canada's variety show in Jonquière, Quebec in 1963.



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Blackface continues to be a recurring problem in Quebec. High-profile examples include: a group of students in Université de Montréal's Hautes études commerciales painting their faces and bodies and acting out an array of Jamaican clichés during frosh week in 2011; comedian Mario Jean impersonating fellow comedian Boucar Diouf at Les Olivier theatre gala in May 2013; and Joël Legendre playing singer Gregory Charles in Radio-Canada's *Bye bye* year-end show in 2013.