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Getting Under the Skin: Antiblackness, Proximity, and Resistance in the *SLĀV* Affair

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Article abstract

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Getting Under the Skin: Antiblackness, Proximity, and Resistance in the *SLĀV* Affair

PHILIP S. S. HOWARD

SLĀV is a musical stage play directed by Robert Lepage, and based on recordings by singer Béatrice "Betty" Bonifassi. The recordings are Bonifassi's reinterpretations of music composed by enslaved and incarcerated African Americans—that is Black people labouring under, and resisting, the conditions of slavery and its afterlife. Though Lepage and Bonifassi promoted the show as an homage to Black people, *SLĀV* opened at the 2018 Montreal International Jazz Festival to protests by the *SLĀV* Resistance Collective, accusing it of cultural appropriation. *SLĀV* was eventually cancelled as Black artists began pulling out of the festival. Unsurprisingly, Lepage, Bonifassi and much of the Quebec public accused the protestors of censorship, and of misunderstanding Quebec's unique context.

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SLĀV*, un spectacle musical réalisé par Robert Lepage, met de l'avant des compositions par la chanteuse Béatrice "Betty" Bonifassi réalisées à partir d'enregistrements captés par cette dernière de chants d'esclaves et d'afro-américains incarcérés—tant de personnes de race noire qui ont dû subir les conditions de l'esclavage et ses séquelles et y résister. Lepage et Bonifassi ont dit du spectacle qu'il s'agissait d'un hommage aux personnes de race noire, et pourtant, la première de* SLĀV*au Festival international de jazz de Montréal en 2018 a été marquée par des manifestations organisées par le collectif* SLĀV*-Résistance, lequel qualifiait le spectacle d'appropriation culturelle.* SLĀV *a finalement été annulé quand plusieurs artistes noirs se sont retirés du festival. Comme on pouvait s'y attendre, Lepage, Bonifassi et bon nombre de gens au Québec ont accusé les manifestants de vouloir censurer le spectacle et de méconnaître le contexte singulier de cette province.*

Dans une analyse qu'il inscrit dans le domaine des études sur les Noirs du Canada, Philip S. S. Howard se penche sur les discours sur SLĀV *tel qu'ils se sont manifestés à travers les propos tenus par Bonifassi, Lepage, les journalistes et les commentateurs. Howard fait valoir que* SLĀV *illustre bien le contexte plus large du racisme anti-noir au Québec et s'attarde aux gestes d'inclusion et de proximité conformes aux modes d'esclavage et à leurs prolongements en Nouvelle-France/au Québec. Selon lui, ces gestes tentent de contenir la négritude à l'intérieur des frontières nationales, linguistiques et autres en contrôlant ses manifestations. Pour cette raison, la résistance noire doit contester ces frontières et revendiquer la solidarité entre Noirs peu importe leur emplacement.*

Rinaldo Walcott, in a 2001 article, comments on the impossibility of aligning Black popular culture with the boundaries of the Canadian nation state. He writes:

> [...] Caribbean/black popular cultural works in Canada are crucially engaged in a politic of how to belong to the nation-state as not-quite-citizens and, simultaneously, how to desire beyond the too rigid confines of nation-state governmentality—a governmentality reflected in official versions of multiculturalism [...] ("Caribbean" 127)

Here, Walcott notes that Black life which finds expression through Black popular culture is impacted by the fraught relationships among Blackness, belonging (in Canada), and boundaries. In other words, Black people are invited to belong to the "multicultural" Canadian nation state (to whatever meagre extent this process might be considered invitation) in ways that do violence to our existence and our identification *as* Black people. Indeed, in speaking of impossibility, Walcott signals the inherent antagonism between Blackness and the Canadian settler-colonial nation state. At particular issue are the perils of benevolent gestures of inclusion—the ways in which "belonging" within Canada for Black people requires, variously, that Blackness be distorted, constrained, violated, and/or erased—and the ways in which these processes implicate art, performance, and (popular) culture. What, then, are the perils when antiblackness becomes the grammar for performing a hegemonic white story of egalitarian inclusion? The present article considers this question by exploring the specific case of the theatrical production, *SLĀV*—or more precisely, the discourse around it—as an instance in Quebec theatre that is embroiled in precisely such a fraught project.

I come at this project as an education scholar concerned with the pedagogical processes and knowledge producing endeavours through which we learn and normalize antiblackness and racial violence. In this special issue concerned with "US-Canada borderlands," I am occupied by the notion of antiblackness as global episteme undergirding the post-Columbus world, such that political and geographical boundaries like the forty-ninth parallel are of attenuated consequence, even as I examine both the imposition of these boundaries to constrain Black life and resistance, and the particularities of antiblackness's instantiation in Quebec—an instantiation better understood as modality than essence.

It is not irrelevant that Walcott identifies these relations within the realm of the arts inasmuch as arts and culture re-present the world to us, and serve as vehicles through which subjects can know themselves. In Canada in general, the narration of national identity has largely involved problematic claims to multiculturalism, a concept the government of Canada began to use to define Canadianness during the 1963 Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism (Haque). The discourse of multiculturalism has since served to organize racialized social relationships in Canada (Bannerji; Haque; Walcott, "The Book of Others").

These relations play out somewhat differently (neither better or worse) in Quebec, Canada's only officially Francophone province. Quebec claims interculturalism rather than multiculturalism. Though more a difference in nomenclature than policy, Quebec insists on interculturalism in the context of its own nationalist struggle within Canada, which, not without some justification, rejects the strategic mobilization of multiculturalism by the government of Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau to discipline the province's claims upon it (Nugent). Yet within

the province, this distinction frames the particular hierarchical relationships between a white Quebecois Francophone majority—*les Québecois de souche*—and what it refers to as its "cultural communities."

In Quebec, the arts play an important role in establishing Quebecois identity and advancing Quebec nationalism (see Hurley). Of course, nation building is an inherently racial project, and therefore it follows that the arts in Quebec also serve to narrate and construct its particular racialized social relations with "cultural communities," even if this is done in the name of openness and egalitarianism—that is, interculturalism. This is perhaps demonstrated in the remarks of Simon Brault, the Director and CEO of the Canada Council for the Arts, who has held directorship positions at the National Theatre School of Canada, and who was founder and president of Culture Montreal, a non-profit concerned with placing the arts at the centre of the development of the city. Brault recounts having advanced:

> the idea that the affirmation of francophone identity [to wit, Quebec nationalist identity] takes place through art. And especially through theater. This was developed in the 1970s and 1980s, even thinking that this vision was universalistic and humanistic; that Quebecois culture is one of affirmation, which has enabled a nation [i.e. Quebec] to overcome its oppressed status. (Lalonde, my translation)

We see here the role of the arts and specifically theatre, in Quebec's cultural politics. However, this statement also tells us something more about the provincial context. Brault's statement hints at the way in which Quebec makes its nationalist claims through universalization, and the erasure of difference. Indeed, Quebec nationalism is notorious for its postracialist tendency to claim to have transcended racism—indeed, to never have been involved in racism while engaging in racism in very marked and unapologetic ways (Howard). This is especially so to the extent that it understands itself exclusively as an oppressed minority. Thus Brault, in the statement above, concedes that Quebec's nationalistic self-determination through the arts "may have been at the expense of other minority issues" (Lalonde). But in fact, the Quebec state's nationalist struggles as a linguistic minority are intertwined with its settler-colonial history, as well as its *current* efforts to be recognized *as such* as a "founding nation" or "founding culture" of Canada on equal footing with British colonizers (see Walcott, "The Book of Others"; Haque), and distinct from its "cultural communities"—which is to say, its inhabitants who are not of French or British heritage, and who are often racialized. These co-existing discourses were clearly demonstrated recently where a journalist objected to the Quebecois being conceived of as "a community," declaring:

> Let's be honest, when your ancestors were the first Europeans to open up the North American continent and settle it permanently, to be shrunken to a "community" [...] is a slap in the face. Les Québécois, and the French Canadians outside Quebec, are a people. A nation. Not an ethnic community, whatever that is. (Ravary, "Francophones")

Given the ubiquity of antiblackness[1]—that is, the Western ontologies that position Blackness as the foil against which Western human subjectivity is constructed (Wynter)—and the role of the arts in Quebec, we can expect that the misalignment of Blackness with the

nation-state with which Walcott is concerned would be found in Quebec theatre amid these universalizing techniques. As I shall argue, these take place through claims of egalitarianism and proximity to Blackness—particularly where non-Black Quebecers presume to tell stories about Black experience or to "include" Black people on their terms without appropriate consultation with Black communities. Consequently, Black people often find ourselves having to resist these antiblack artistic projects, much to the umbrage of the non-Black artists who create them. Walcott's meditation on Black popular culture announces Blackness's resistance to the antiblack boundaries of the nation-state in/through/against the arts, and suggests that Black resistance in Canada employs, indeed requires, this confounding of nation-state geographies.

To be clear, as I proceed to analyze the *SLĀV* debacle, I do not attempt a review of the show. I have not seen it, and do not intend to see it. Besides, it has been insightfully reviewed by others, including Craft ("*SLĀV*") and the *SLĀV* Resistance Collective.[2] I am more interested in the discourse ***around*** the show rather than just the show itself, and rely for my analysis on discussions about the show by its creators, and by the many who participated in the public debate about it in the media and online—both supporters and detractors. Recordings of the show are unavailable, so in the few instances where I engage in dramatic analysis, it is based upon audience eye-witness accounts of the play as published in media. These accounts have not been contested by the creators of the show.

Rather than review, then, the task I undertake here is three-fold: first to situate the dominant public discourse around *SLĀV* within the larger context of antiblack projects of universalism and proximity (to Blackness) in Quebec; second, to demonstrate how the backlash against Black dissent to the show attempted to impose various boundaries that simultaneously fail to recognize antiblackness's expansiveness and attempt to contain, fragment, and eject Blackness; and third, to speak of the ways in which, in a tradition of Black resistance in Quebec, the resistance against *SLĀV* gained some of its objectives by refusing to be limited by the imposition of linguistic and national boundaries.

Introducing *SLĀV*

The show *SLĀV* is a musical stage play directed by Quebec playwright, actor, and stage director Robert Lepage, and produced by his company Ex Machina. It is based on songs from two albums recorded by French-cum-Quebecoise singer, Betty Bonifassi, who stars in the production. Bonifassi's albums compose her re-interpretations of African American music created under the most antiblack conditions, that is, work songs written by enslaved and incarcerated African Americans, and sung as they laboured under, and resisted, the conditions of slavery and its afterlife.

SLĀV's storyline meanders between past and present, Quebec and beyond. Notably, it included a scene in which the majority non-Black cast plays enslaved Black women picking cotton on an American plantation, and a scene in which Bonifassi, who is white, plays Harriet Tubman, the iconic Black champion of anti-slavery resistance (Hamilton).[3]

SLĀV opened at the Festival International de Jazz de Montreal (FIJM) on June 26, 2018, but had been the subject of controversy since shortly after the show was first advertised in November 2017. At that time, author and artistic/dramaturgical advisor, Marilou Craft,

expressed her concerns about the concept ("Qu'est-ce"). Craft was primarily troubled by the lack of Black cast members, and the ways in which, in the name of human solidarity, the show uses the music of enslaved Black people to direct attention *away from* the enslavement of Black people.

Lepage and Bonifassi never contacted Craft, but perhaps as a consequence of her critique, consulted with rapper and popular historian, Aly Ndiaye, who offered them historical information about slavery in Quebec to which they might connect the story of African American slavery, while, in turn, expressing his own concerns about the composition of the cast (Ndiaye). Both Craft and Ndiaye's concerns were disregarded in the eventual production.

Unsurprisingly, then, at its opening and each day it played, the show, with its cast of seven—only two of whom are Black—was protested by a diverse group led by the *SLĀV* Resistance Collective, a "group of visual artists, musicians, writers, academics, community organizers, and journalists" (*SLĀV* Resistance Collective 19). Protestors again challenged the use of non-Black artists to portray Black people while Black artists struggle to find work in Montreal's arts scene (*SLĀV* Resistance Collective 13). Though the protesters were initially derided, on July 4, 2018 the FIJM eventually cancelled the show's remaining nine of sixteen performances.

Lepage and Bonifassi referred to the resistance as intolerance, violence, and hate, and to the cancelling of the show as censorship and a "blow to artistic freedom of expression" (Ex Machina; Lauzon). Furthermore, the public backlash against the resistance was sharp. But ironically, the show had been described by Lepage/Ex Machina and Bonifassi as an act of remembrance and homage to the struggle of enslaved African Americans. Further, Bonifassi sees it as a project that brings diverse people together in human community, and as such, as an act of love, saying:

> I'm doing this with such a big heart, dignity, precision and research. I waited a long time to find the right way to make this work. I don't see colour; to me, it doesn't exist, physically or in music. People talk about whites taking black songs. Uniting two colours is modern. [...] I wanted [...] to create a show where we feel united. (Dunlevy)

The coalescence of antiblackness with warm, empathetic, universalizing efforts wrought through proximity to Blackness therefore characterized *SLĀV*. I argue here that this dynamic is not new, but rather can be traced through the kinds of encounters that Blackness has had historically in what is now Quebec.

Historical Background, Familiar Themes

To understand these encounters, we must start with the fact of slavery in Quebec. Though largely elided in official narratives, slavery occurred in the territories now known as Quebec, laying the foundation for antiblackness in the settler colonial society that has descended from it (Austin 7; Maynard). In the French colony of New France, both kidnapped Africans and members of nations indigenous to the territory were enslaved. Since the enslavement of Africans was practiced globally across Western societies, and since hegemonic modern

ideas of the Human were developed in opposition to the condition of enslavement, the idea of slavery in Canada, as across the West, became strongly associated with Blackness, which therefore came to stand in as the antithesis of Humanity (Cooper 70 and 84; Walcott, "The Problem" 94).

Slavery in New France and the rest of Canada differed from the large-scale plantation form typical of other slave societies. However, scholars of Canadian slavery have insisted that this difference is not to be imagined to mean that Canadian slavery was less cruel than its analogues elsewhere (e.g. Cooper; Nelson, *Slavery* 62). Indeed, the peculiar features of the institution of slavery in New France informed its particular cruelties. For instance, for reasons both material (Cooper 77) and ideological (Harbison 61), the proportion of enslaved Black people to white people in New France was relatively very small and scattered across several slave-owning households, making it difficult for Black people to form community (Cooper 159). This challenge was compounded by the fact that enslaved Africans were brought to New France from multiple culturally and linguistically diverse locations (Nelson, *Slavery* 78). These barriers to community imposed conditions of isolation that characterized Black enslavement in Quebec, which along with, of course, the dehumanizing conditions of enslavement, often led the enslaved to extreme desperation or deep depression (Harbison 65; Nelson, *Slavery* 77). Nevertheless, enslaved Black people sometimes tenaciously formed community with each other across these boundaries where possible (Nelson, *Slavery* 78).

Given their small numbers, enslaved Black people were forced into close proximity with white people. Black people sometimes forged imperfect community with members of the white underclasses—whites who were indentured labourers, domestics, or destitute, but nevertheless free (Cooper 175; Harbison 52). However, these interracial relationships were extremely precarious, as these white "friends" might at any moment take advantage of the enslaved and/or sell out their friendship by leveraging antiblack tropes that white law enforcers would easily believe (Cooper 18; Harbison 53-55).

Moreover, the isolation of enslaved Black people was not assuaged by their enforced proximity to the slave-owning elite. Though the enslaved "often lived in the same houses as their owners, ate the same food, were baptized by their owners, and had owners or their close relatives as godparents, and sometimes [...] received the name of the owners' family" (Cooper 76), this, at best, created only the cruel illusion of community. The fact of enslavement precluded the possibility of any relationship based in human dignity between the enslaved and those who considered them property.

Slaveowners' facile claims to community with the enslaved were such that even a child could see through them. A case in point, is that of priest Paul Lejeune, who upon baptising and conferring his family name upon an enslaved boy in 1632, suggested that they had now become alike as members of a community of Christian humans. The boy—no doubt to the priest's shock—rebuffed the spurious claim of kinship and inclusion, remarking: "you say that by baptism I shall be like you: I am black and you are white, I must have my skin taken off then in order to be like you" (Winks 1; Cooper 75). In this way, the first enslaved Black person in New France for whom there are records, Olivier Lejeune, who was only eight years old at the time (Winks 2), prefigured the kinds of Black resistance that have since been necessary in Quebec. The important points here are that from the earliest days of Black existence in what is now Quebec, arrangements of proximity that might superficially resemble community

did not mitigate, but rather were sites of, a pervasive antiblackness. Black people in Quebec have long had to resist these attempts at easy community by pointing out antiblackness.

Since this time, antiblackness and resistance to it have persisted in analogous forms in Quebec. Notably, the Quebec state has repeatedly forged its linguistic and nationalist identity against Blackness under the guise of commonality while demeaning and/or erasing Blackness. For example, Mills (9) argues that beginning in the 1930s, Quebec advanced Francophone interests by articulating its relationship to Haïti in familial terms as centres of the Francophone world in the western hemisphere. Yet the state simultaneously regarded Haïtians in antiblack terms as "deviant and childlike," in order to know itself as civilizationally superior (5). Mills further notes that this duality informed the Quebec state's attitude toward the inclusion of Haïtian migrants to the province in the 1960s and beyond (9-10).

Similarly, in the 1960s and 1970s during Quebec's Quiet Revolution, which largely defined the nationalist, social, and political entity that Quebec is today, white Quebecois intellectual Pierre Vallières made the now notorious assertion that the white Quebecois were the *Nègres blancs d'Amérique*—that is, the white Negroes (or niggers in some translations) of the Americas (Vallières). In so doing, Vallières shored up the legitimacy of the nationalist struggle of Quebec's white Francophone majority by identifying it closely with African American liberation movements, while supplanting actual Black people in Quebec and erasing *their* struggles against antiblackness (Austin 67). Vallières's argument further relied on racist tropes of the threatening Black man (Scott 1291), and, in a classically antiblack manner, tacitly took exception to white Quebecers being treated like Black people (Hampton; Scott 1291), both of which served to position the white Quebecois as superior.

Quebec or Black, But Not Both

Other scholars have attested to the ways in which antiblackness has continued to play out in Quebec through to the present. For example, Khalil's study of community policing practices in a Montreal public housing complex illustrates the ways in which the state (in this case, Montreal municipal government) always already constructs Black people as community's outside—as those against whom the community is defined and from whom it must be defended.

Within this context driven by the self-interest of the hegemonic Quebec nationalist project, Black people are forced to choose between, on one hand, cooperating with Quebec antiblackness in order to gain a toehold on inclusion in community, and on the other hand, naming and resisting antiblackness and being relegated to outsider status (Mills; Khalil 102; Mugabo). This applies a particular pressure to Francophone Black people in Quebec, who Quebec's nationalist imperative seeks to seduce through the claim that their political interests coincide with those of the white Francophone Quebecois, and importantly *not* with those of Anglophone Blacks in Quebec (white Quebec's racial and linguistic double-Other), or those of African Americans (Mugabo 6, 15). This seduction demands that Black people in Quebec who speak French identify ethnically (as Haïtian, Congolese, etc.) and overdetermine themselves as Francophone at the expense of their Blackness (Mills 12; Mugabo). Belonging in Quebec thus demands, through ethnicization, that Black people forget their very real experiences with antiblackness in Quebec, which do not discriminate by language

(Mugabo 14). It also requires that Black people overlook the long history of Quebec's/New France's implication in the oppression of Haïti, Haïtians, other Francophone Black people, and Black people in general, within and outside of Quebec (Mugabo). Stated differently, national "belonging" for Black people in Quebec imposes boundaries that seek to interrupt the claiming of an expansive Black political identity.

Two instances of blackface that involved Black celebrities in the Quebec entertainment scene might help to illustrate this Faustian dilemma within the arts. The first involved Black comedian Boucar Diouf, who was portrayed in blackface by comedian Mario Jean during the 2013 Gala Les Olivier comedy awards show. When some Black people and Black community organizations, notably the Black Coalition of Quebec, expressed their dismay, Jean and many of the journalists who defended his performance retorted that this blackface performance was not racism but an act of homage (Durocher; Lagacé; Ravary, "Mario Jean"). Indeed, according to one journalist, this blackface portrayal "was the opposite of racism: Diouf was being celebrated as part of the gang" (Lagacé, translated by the author). Diouf, in turn, responded not only to defend Jean, but in such a way as to disparage the very notion of Black community. He writes:

> And this *virtual black community*, which serves as a stronghold for all these intolerant people, *is not mine* and I do not remember having mandated any coalition to defend my blackness in the media. (Diouf, emphasis added, translated by the author)

In another incident, Black comedian Normand Brathwaite used blackface to parody journalist François Bugingo in the 2015 edition of Quebec's annual year-end revue, the Bye-Bye. Brathwaite is a well-loved fixture in Quebec entertainment, whose popularity is marked by a kind of mutual colourblindness. As one journalist remarks, in a comment that at once demonstrates ostensible colourblindness while providing evidence of the racial logic that structures ideas of inclusion in Quebec: "he has become so much a part of us, and it is so unimportant, that I have forgotten the colour of his skin," (FM93, at 00:27, translated by author). Brathwaite in turn has, on several occasions, declared Quebec the "least racist place on Earth" (Lapointe; Dufour; see also Bergeron; FM93), and denies the existence of systemic racism in Quebec (FM93 at 4:45), despite admitting to experiencing racial profiling and police brutality here (Dufour).

Brathwaite considers it his role to represent Quebec's "cultural communities" in the media, as opposed to "standing up for Black rights" (Dufour, translated by author). Thus, his willing involvement in a blackface incident is as perplexing as it is telling. Brathwaite was hired to play Bugingo in blackface because of Bye-Bye producer Louis Morissette's resentment that Radio-Canada, the station that carries the Bye-Bye, required him to use Black actors instead of white actors in blackface, to portray Black people (Delmar). Much like Diouf's, Brathwaite's response to the subsequent Black outrage deeply disparaged the notion of Black community. He remarked: "The Black Coalition, me I have never voted for them. I'm sorry, I do not know who they are. It's four Negroes [or niggers] with a fax somewhere in an office" (JournaldeMontréal.com, translated by author). Then, when questioned about his controversial use of the term *nègre* ("C'est quatre nègres avec un fax"), as opposed to the more acceptable *Noir*, he later commented: "the word negro[nigger] is a beautiful word. The

problem with this word, it's that we put 'damn' before it. But it's a beautiful word, which I'm proud of" (JournaldeMontréal.com, translated by author).

In both cases, the antiblackness that Diouf and Brathwaite not only overlook, but also perform in order to belong within the Quebec entertainment scene is striking. Regardless of their personal opinions about blackface, the force with which they undermine and distance themselves from the notion of Black community is gratuitous, but appears to be what both celebrities feel is required to ensure they will continue to be regarded, however precariously, as part of "the gang."

Crucially, then, Black resistance in Quebec has often had to defy inclusion under these antiblack conditions, and to claim Blackness beyond linguistic and national boundaries. The radical 1968 Congress of Black Writers crossed national, institutional, linguistic, and generational boundaries to bring Black people together from across the world with the common purpose of raising Black consciousness and resisting transnational colonialism (Austin 16). Haïtian migrants in the 1970s and beyond resisted the oppressive conditions they faced in Quebec by linking their plight beyond provincial and national boundaries to global antiblackness (Mills 10). And Black youth in Montreal in the 1990s organized successfully, across the city's real and imagined geographic and linguistic boundaries, against police brutality, police murders of Black youth, and a rise in white supremacist activity in Montreal (Mugabo 8).

What I have been outlining here then, are the ways in which, throughout Quebec's history, projects of ostensible inclusion in Quebec have been inherently antiblack, while Blackness has served as a foil through and against which Quebec might forge its identity. This history suggests that there is no Blackness that can simultaneously belong in Quebec in its normative nationalist imagination while speaking honestly to Black people's persistent experiences with racism and antiblackness in the province. Stated differently, Blackness in Quebec will always be at odds with nationalist inclusion projects that seek proximity, but that really are efforts to dictate to Black people the unilateral antiblack terms upon which they will be allowed to be. Black resistance must therefore defy these boundaries.

Slipping into Blackness

So here I turn to the ways in which the *SLĀV* participated in the relations that I have been discussing. While not overtly nationalistic, *SLĀV* does work with ideas of proximity to Blackness that speak to the ways in which it imagines Blackness and Black un/belonging in Quebec. And if we take seriously the idea that Quebec theatre and performance is always implicitly about the articulation of Quebec identity (Hurley), then this nationalism must lurk in *SLĀV*. We get one glimpse of these foundations when Bonifassi says that the purpose of *SLĀV* is to "preserve the memory of the history of this African people, deported here against their will to build our continents" (Radio Canada, *SLĀV* at 3:09). This statement repeats the dispossession of Indigenous peoples by referring to "*our* continents" and exemplifies antiblackness by referring to slavery in the dissimulating terms of deportation and labour exploitation. These statements thus channel two pivotal moments in an antiblack, settler-colonial, nationalist project—and do so under the guise of empathy.

Perhaps one of the expressions most revealing of *SLĀV*'s involvement in problematic antiblack relations comes from Lepage himself. In his statement defending the show shortly after its cancellation, he wrote:

> The practice of theatre rests on a very simple principle: playing at being someone else. Playing the other. *Slipping into the other's skin*[4] in order to try to understand them, and through the same act *maybe also understand oneself* [...] As of the moment that we are no longer allowed to *slip into the skin* of the other, where we are *forbidden to recognize ourselves in the other*, theatre is denied its very nature [...] (Ex Machina, my translation, emphasis added)

The language used here could not be more striking in its similarity to the language Saidiya Hartman uses to describe the relations of slavery and its aftermath—perpetrated even by those who imagine themselves to be benevolent. Hartman writes:

> [...] the reenactment of subjection occurs by way of [...] the obliteration of the other through the *slipping on of blackness* or an *empathic identification* in which one substitutes the self for the other. (7, emphasis added)

Ironically, then, Lepage uses Hartman's exact metaphor—unawares I presume—to deny participating in the very phenomenon that Hartman indicts—that is, the way in which projects of empathy that presume to speak on behalf of Black people work through proximity to erase Black people.

By speaking of slipping into the other's skin in the context of the *SLĀV* debate, Lepage admits an attempt to inhabit Blackness as a vehicle through which to understand himself and others who are not Black. He rightly concludes that he is being asked to consider the limits of "recogniz[ing] oneself in the other" (Ex Machina, my translation) by this means, and to reconsider his sense of entitlement to such a methodology. Black objection is to the conceit of using one's non-Black experience as a lens through which to represent Black experience which is, by definition, incommensurable with one's own. It is also to the concomitant illusion that doing so counts as genuine engagement with Blackness that allows non-Black people to understand themselves differently, when in fact they have avoided meaningful interaction with Black people and their knowledge.

In *SLĀV* we see this literally where non-Black people play enslaved Black people, but also more inherently in the show and the mainstream discourses around *SLĀV* where the Black experience of enslavement is used as analogy for all experiences of oppression. *SLĀV* was advertised in multiple media, including the FIJM's website, as a show that "forge[s] links in a universal way between different known and less well known—or deliberately forgotten—pages of history that led humanity to enslave peoples" (La Presse). Further, Bonifassi says:

> We don't talk about black and white in the show. We talk about human pain, experienced together. All cultures and ethnicities suffer the same. [...] What I wanted profoundly was to bring people together, to create a show where we feel united, no matter who is talking, where there is no more colour or origin. (Dunlevy)

Thus, while performing Black songs emerging from experiences of Black suffering that depended integrally upon being racialized as Black, *SLĀV* directs attention away from Black experience toward an ostensibly universal human experience of oppression that is colourblind. The specificities of the Black experience thereby disappear. As Hartman further explains, "the materiality of [Black] suffering regularly eludes (re)cognition by virtue of the [Black] body's being replaced by other signs of value, *as well as other bodies* (21, emphasis added). Jared Sexton similarly argues that the effort to analogize racial slavery, the defining moment that brings Blackness (as opposed to Africanness) into being, "loses track of the *singular commodification of* human existence (not simply its labor power) under racial slavery [...] in which a body is rendered as flesh to be accumulated and exchanged" (38, emphasis in original). Thus, analogy that easily substitutes white people for Black, even in an ostensible attempt to understand Black experience, obscures Blackness. By this process, Blackness is emptied of substance and becomes the perfect metaphor—perfect in its malleability now for its lack of concrete referent. This is what Hartman refers to as the fungibility of Blackness as commodity:

> [...] the value of blackness resided in its metaphorical aptitude,whether literally understood as the fungibility of the commodity or understood as the imaginative surface upon which the [white] master and the nation *came to understand themselves* (7, emphasis added). [...] the fungibility of the commodity makes the captive [i.e. Black] body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others' feelings, ideas, desires, and values [...] (21)

This fungibility allows Black experience to be trivialized as a stand-in for any uncomfortable experience, regardless of its severity. This is sensationally demonstrated where one journalist writes:

> go see *SLĀV—a theatrical odyssey through the songs of slaves*. And don't say that the tickets—between $60 and $90—are too expensive: if that's beyond your means, complain to your employer, to your elected officials, to the real holders of the purse strings, the stock market. In other words: emancipate yourself!
>
> This is what one felt deep down, coming out of the media premiere [of *SLĀV*] [...] the imperative to emancipate yourself. To free oneself from obstacles, of whatever sort. (Cormier, my translation)

This flippant treatment of Blackness and slavery is a consequence of universalizing projects of ostensible empathy for Black people that misapprehend Black experience—not just in its magnitude, but in its singularity.

From Misapprehension to Erasure

As Hartman and Sexton argue, the misapprehension that occurs through analogy and by slipping on/into Blackness results in its erasure. True to form, we see erasures of Blackness and Black experience at multiple levels in *SLĀV* and the mainstream discourse around it.

To begin with, in typical Canadian fashion, *SLĀV* locates issues of racism in the United States and noticeably not in Quebec or Canada. The show takes up African American slavery, while nowhere mentioning the fact of slavery in New France. Given Ndiaye's intervention mentioned above, and given that the African American experience is used to analogize experiences of oppression of all types, including, as Bonifassi insists, the enslavement of the Slavic people from whom she is descended, it is conspicuous indeed that there is no reference to the enslavement of Black people in Quebec's history.

In the same manner, when the show's Black main character, Khattia, experiences racial profiling, this takes place in the United States rather than in Quebec, despite the fact that Black people have long protested, and continue to protest, the racial profiling they experience here. This geographical sleight-of-hand displaces antiblackness beyond the boundaries of Quebec and Canada, suggesting that it cannot and does not happen there. That *SLĀV* takes this approach is not incidental, but is consistent with mainstream Quebec discourse's willful inability to conceive of antiblackness here, or to think of it as an Anglophone issue. Indeed, when the Black Coalition of Quebec responded to Normand Brathwaite's vilification of them and cited their involvement in contesting multiple instances of racial profiling *in Montreal*, at least one Quebec media outlet recounted the exchange, but claims that the BCQ spoke of "recent cases of racial profiling *in the United States*" (Envedette, at 0:50, my translation).

Further, Quebec *nègres blancs* discourse that erases Black people and their claims, by supplanting them with Quebec's claims to an uncomplicated oppressed identity, rears its head in the *SLĀV* debate. Thus, one online commenter writes: "I don't understand all the fuss. Because for me it was just theatre. And there was a time that we were *les negres blancs d'Amerique*." In response, at least two other commentators rush to correct the comment, saying: "*Les nègres de blancs d'Amérique* [sic] ... thats [sic] us still" and "That's what we are still ... *nègres blancs*" (comments, Ex Machina, my translations).

Finally, the *SLĀV* storyline erases blackness through a process of ethnicization (Mugabo). It is conspicuous that when Khattia's friend comes to rescue her from her experience of racial profiling, she re-enters Canada/Quebec not as Black but as Haïtian. She is invited by Bonifassi's character in the play to be a part of a production featuring "the prisoner songs of Alan Lomax"—quite transparently the show's representation of itself in the plot. According to Marilou Craft ("*SLĀV*"), the script has Khattia wondering whether it is because she is Black that she is being invited to join the cast. But she is reassured by Bonifassi's character that it is because she is an expert on Haïti—in other words, because she is Haïtian. This ethnicization suggests the apparent irrelevance of race, particularly the irrelevance of African American experience, to Khattia's identity as a Black person in Quebec. Indeed, in reference to the Quebec context, one character apparently says, "le noir, c'est qui?" (Craft, "*SLĀV*")—that is, "the Blacks, who are they?"

Rendering Blackness Invisible and Inaudible

In projects like *SLĀV*, where those who are not Black speak in the place of Black people, Blackness is impossible to hear or see. The inaudibility and invisibility of Blackness are both product and condition of possibility for the *SLĀV* project. Bonifassi has two albums on which she records the songs that are the backbone of *SLĀV*: one is self-titled, and the other is entitled *Lomax* in "homage to the ethnomusicologist who went out to collect [this music] in locations that were not very nice" (Radio Canada, at 1:25-1:35, my translation). Despite the 20 years of research Bonifassi claims to have done for *SLĀV*, somehow the names of the Black composers, such as Robert Leroy Johnson and Huddie William Ledbetter, are eclipsed by those of the non-Black persons who compiled their work. Additionally, in my reading, when Bonifassi speaks of the "not very nice" prison conditions in the context of homage to Lomax, she eclipses the conditions of slavery's afterlife that produced the incarceration of Black people, highlighting, instead, whatever temporary discomfort Lomax perhaps experienced when he visited prisons to collect music. And if the claim is that the focus is on those who compiled the music, we somehow hear nothing of Zora Neale Hurston who accompanied Lomax on some of his ethnomusicological travels, who also made field recordings, and who was instrumental to helping Lomax gain access to some of the Black communities where he made his recordings (Cappetti & Hurston). In the end, this project of ostensible homage pays scant, if any, attention, to the lives of the Black people whose music is being performed or who assisted in its preservation, nor does it speak to the incredible conditions of antiblackness under which the music was created. On all counts Blackness and Black experience are silenced and invisibilized.

Where Black people cannot be heard, non-Black others feel obligated to step in to take their place. Bonifassi's music, in general, overtly claims to speak for Black people where they cannot speak for themselves, and where ostensibly there is no one else doing this work. According to an article reviewing one of her albums, Bonifassi's work—which really just remakes Black music—"convey[s] the stifled speech of [...] uprooted and oppressed men and women" (Queniart, my translation). Likewise, in *SLĀV*, Bonifassi performs this music to, in her words, "preserve the memory of the history of this African people [...] It allows us to keep this history present, to not forget what the fate of these people was and, of course, not to repeat these schemes of power" (Radio Canada, *SLĀV*, at 3:20, my translation).

Here we see Bonifassi does not understand herself to be joining Black artists or other Black people who might also be doing this memory work. Rather she positions her work as an important intervention without which we risk forgetting about "these [oppressed] people" who by the framing, seem to have no connection to Black people we might identify today. We are asked to believe that Bonifassi is bringing something unique to the stage. This notion resonates in the public perception of Bonifassi's work. Thus, in response to complaints about the lack of Black people in the *SLĀV* cast, one online commenter writes:

> I hate that nobody here is speaking about Betty Bonifassi. It is she, who, after hearing and being touched by these slave songs, decided to remake them, so that they would not be forgotten ... *SLĀV* could have been sung by a singer of colour, as some

> would have liked, but it was Betty *who had the idea first.* (comments on Lepage, my translation, emphasis added)

This "columbusing"—that is, whites claiming to pioneer that which has long been in existence among racialized people (Salinas)—is made possible in *SLĀV* by the erasure effected through slipping on Blackness in the guise of benevolence.

Hartman reminds us that the practice of speaking benevolently in the place of Black people was historically rooted in the structural conditions of slavery under which Blackness is not allowed to speak for itself, while obscuring how these relations are integral to the act of speaking-for (19). It is to related structural foundations that Elena Stoodley, one of the members of the *SLĀV* Resistance Collective, responds in an interview, indicating the absurdity of the presumption that Bonifassi's intervention was a first:

> Interviewer: Is the focal point here that the stories have not even begun to be told, and if they are going to start to be told they should be told by the community that went through it?
>
> Stoodley: They have been told by millions, like thousands of people over and over again *by us*. And I think other people that are not Black have done the same work. I think it's interesting to think that this is the first time that people ever heard about slave songs. We've *been* hearing about slave songs! (Breakfast Television, at 4:08)

Stoodley's statement also challenges the idea that the Collective's protest was simply a crude objection to white people singing Black songs, instead indicating the ways in which while Black accounts of the same history go unheard, white accounts are not only heard, but eclipse Black accounts. Bonifassi's work is made possible by the erasure of the multiple ways in which Black people tell and sing their own stories, and in *SLĀV*, her voice is amplified by the power and prominence Robert Lepage is able to lend it. Further, by the logic of the online comment, since Bonifassi is understood as a pioneer in telling these stories, she earns the right to supplant Black people from telling their own stories.

This usurping of the authorial salience of Black voice comes with disastrous consequences for Black people. For example, on the basis of her research, Bonifassi presumes to speak authoritatively about why Black people sang while enslaved. She says:

> They were seeking the strength to be able to work eighteen hours a day non-stop. I read things that said that these people would fall into states of meditation and they could even leave their bodies by repeating these mantras—that is, these songs strung one after the other, and repeated for hours and hours and hours. So this trance brought them to a state of no suffering. (Radio Canada, *Betty Bonifassi* at 4:15, my translation)

By this account, instead of speaking of the ways that Black people resisted and sought to escape the deadly violence of slavery (as the enslaved certainly did), Bonifassi suggests that they drew on super-human (or monstrous) resources to give themselves to slave labour

without suffering. Bonifassi thus undermines the very notion that Black people suffered as other humans might under the yoke of slavery. The role of this dehumanizing spectacularization in producing and intensifying contemporary antiblack violence is well documented (Marable; Silverstein; Waytz, Hoffman, and Trawalter).

Resistance, Backlash and Boundaries

But within the modes of antiblackness demonstrated by *SLĀV*, Black experience can only ever serve as analogy for the purposes of intensifying appeals for justice for non-Black people. It is never sufficient ground for Black peoples' own appeals for justice, and is secondary to white people's assessments. Instead, Black testimony to its own historical and ongoing experience of antiblackness is always already suspect, heard, *a priori*, as so much fabrication. Sexton notes:

> The disqualification of black resistance is not unrelated to the peculiar and long-standing cross-racial phenomenon in which the white bourgeois and proletarian revolutions on both sides of the Atlantic can allegorize themselves as revolts against slavery, while the hemispheric black struggle against actually existing slavery and its afterlife cannot authorize itself literally in those same terms. [...] The metaphoric transfer that dismisses the legitimacy of black struggles against racial slavery [...] while it appropriates black suffering as the template for nonblack grievances remains one of the defining features of contemporary political culture. (Sexton 42)

We get a stark example of how the legitimacy of Black testimony gets invalidated in the plot of *SLĀV* in a scene in which the white main character comes to the aid of Khattia, her "only Black friend," to rescue her from police custody after her experience of racial profiling (Craft, "*SLĀV*"). Though Khattia says she was arrested for no reason, the white character is unsure that her friend might not have brought police attention on herself. She says, "Je connais ton petit caractère" (literally "I know your little character" but probably better translated "I know that you can have a little attitude") (Craft, "*SLĀV*"). This storyline reinforces the invalidation of Black testimony, even by one's white "friends," while failing to interrogate white violence. It thus is complicit in allowing the violence to continue.

Given the prevailing hegemonic inability to conceive of antiblackness in Quebec, Black people, if they want to assert themselves *as Black*, with a testimony about Quebec antiblackness, cannot be from Quebec. Thus, it is not surprising that the dominant response to the *SLĀV* resistance framed the resistance as alien to Quebec precisely because it brought a critique of Quebec antiblackness. I argue in this section that the backlash against the *SLĀV* resistance attempted to invalidate it by imposing linguistic, national and other boundaries that simultaneously attempted to discipline, expel, and fragment Blackness, reinforcing the restricted terms upon which Black people are allowed to exist in Quebec. Ultimately, the media and public discourse considered the resistance to be coming chiefly from those who do not understand Quebec, indeed who are perhaps not from Quebec: those who are Anglophone, influenced by Anglophones, or influenced by ostensibly irrelevant critical

discourses that are "marked by the Anglophone context" (Lalonde). So, for example sociologist Joseph Yvon Thériault says that:

> the strength of American universities in the world makes their concepts, developed within the American context, tend to want to impose themselves in circumstances that are not like theirs. A context makes it possible to understand what is happening in a particular place; and something is lost when we transport [concepts], because we do not transport social relations. (Lalonde, my translation)

Thus, critiques of *SLĀV* are perceived to reflect theoretical frameworks developed in the alien American context, which are therefore, the logic goes, invalid in Quebec. This statement imposes unwarranted national and theoretical boundaries upon critique.

Further, while the resistance to *SLĀV* was homegrown and led by Francophone Black people, it was presumed to be coming from hostile Anglophones. Thus, when Lepage does finally agree to the protestors' request to meet with him, he confesses to being shocked that the members of *SLĀV* Resistance were Francophone. He says:

> I was warned by some people that I was probably going to be dealing with a band of "radicalized Anglos from Concordia University," my whole argument was prepared in English. But when I realized that the vast majority of them were francophones and that the discussion was going to take place mainly in the language of Molière [French], I must admit that I found myself at a loss for words. (qtd. in Boisvert-Magnen, my translation)

Anglophone and American are therefore identifications indiscriminately used to mark Black people who testify to antiblackness in Quebec as alien and antagonistic regardless of their actual relationships to Quebec and the French language.

This story of invoking boundaries to discipline a Blackness that refuses to be contained by language or nation is a recurring story, and in fact can be traced through the history of the Montreal International Jazz Festival, which was the context within which *SLĀV* was staged, and to which journalist and social entrepreneur, Fabrice Vil, speaks in his piece about *SLĀV* (Vil).

The jazz scene in Montreal has distinctly transnational foundations dating from the Prohibition Era in the United States in the 1920s, when American entertainers would cross the border into Canada to be able to access nightclubs where alcohol was sold legally (Burnett, "Jazz in Montreal"). Many agree that the Montreal jazz scene was kept alive through the 1970s, and indeed that the Festival International de Jazz got its beginnings, through the work of Rouè-Doudou Boicel, who was born in French Guiana, studied in Paris, and who settled in Montreal in 1970 (Block). Boicel was convinced that jazz was not dead, and nourished the jazz scene through his Rising Sun Jazz Club, founded in 1975, and his Rising Sun Festijazz events, the first of which was in 1978 (Burnett, "Hall of Fame"). Boicel is clear that, through jazz, his intention was to "promote Black culture first" (Block). Boicel also recounts the resistance to his attempts by the various levels of state government, reporting that he was unable to receive funding from municipal, provincial or federal governments for his festival (Burnett, "Hall

of Fame"). He was told by a representative of the Quebec government that his festival was ineligible because it supported American, not Quebec culture—notwithstanding the involvement of local jazz artists such as Oscar Peterson and Stephen Barry (Block; Burnett, "Hall of Fame"). Indeed, when Boicel cited Peterson's involvement as evidence that the festival was not "American" the official retorted "He's an American" (Burnett, "Hall of Fame") despite the fact that Peterson was born, raised, and lived in Montreal until the age of 33, and always lived in Canada. There is little doubt that the fact that Peterson was Black, Anglophone, and involved in a culturally Black music form that transcended borders contributed to this assessment of him as American. Boicel insists that it was only the dogged support of his African American musician friends—clearly across national boundaries—that helped to keep his club and festival alive for as long as they lasted (Burnett, "Hall of Fame"). This account indicates the tensions between Blackness and national and linguistic boundaries, while also pointing to the structural inequalities with relation to funding in the Quebec arts scene.

This intertwined history is why, in the case of *SLĀV*, one goal of the *SLĀV* Resistance Collective is to draw attention to the structural conditions in the Quebec "cultural scene" whereby "some people have more access to produce their own art at a larger scale, and other people are struggling to have the same access" (Breakfast Television, at 1:15). *SLĀV* Resistance Collective member, Ricardo Lamour, concurs, speaking about the irony that they were called censors by Lepage and Bonifassi while they, as Black artists, "are being censored everyday" because of "artistic narratives and proposals that [aren't allowed the chance] to exist because of the lack of access" (Breakfast Television, at 2:43).

The power of, indeed the indispensability of, Black resistance that refuses to be contained by national and linguistic boundaries, was demonstrated when the Festival International de Jazz de Montreal finally felt forced to cancel *SLĀV*. In addition to the *SLĀV* Resistance Collective's nightly protests and a petition with over 1500 signatures (CBC News), several very high-profile African American artists expressed their support for the resistance on social media, and, in a very public manner, singer-songwriter Moses Sumney cancelled his scheduled performances at the Festival, citing in a detailed letter his concerns about *SLĀV* (Sumney, *Regarding*; Sumney, *Moses Sumney*). The FIJM, clearly seeing that it had much to lose, announced the show's cancellation with an apology to "those hurt" by the show (CBC News).

Conclusion

Since its inception, antiblackness has been neither historically nor geographically contained. The geographical expansiveness of antiblackness should not be surprising given its foundations in the phenomena of colonialism, the transatlantic slave trade, and the geographically inter-connected chattel slave societies of the modern world—all of which are global in scale. However, antiblackness's transnational strategies perpetually attempt to contrive and enforce boundaries upon and among Black people in ways that are always already violent and against the interests of Black people as people (Walcott, "The Problem of the Human"), and that attempt to shut down our resistance to antiblackness. Through the example of *SLĀV*, I have described how this process takes place in theatre and the arts in Quebec through modes of proximity that purport to slip on Blackness.

It is neither my task in this article, nor my preoccupation more generally, to outline ways in which theatre in Quebec can more respectfully engage with Blackness.

Nevertheless, one thing is clear. If Lepage, Bonifassi, and others in Quebec theatre desire to escape the modes of antiblackness in which they are currently deeply engaged, there will need to be radically different ways of pursuing the goal of theatre arts in Quebec than that of "slipping into the other's skin." They will have to listen more carefully to the voices of those with whom they unilaterally claim proximity. As the multifaceted and nuanced resistance project of the *SLĀV* Resistance Collective teaches us, this is a much broader undertaking than it is some attempt at an ostensibly better politics of representation. The Collective does not consider its work to have been completed with the temporary cancellation of *SLĀV*. It recognizes that *SLĀV* is not an aberration, and indicts the broader inequitable structures that enable it. Among other demands, the Collective also seeks: dedicated public arts funding in Quebec for Black, Indigenous and other communities of colour; apologies from the corporate, state and art supporters of *SLĀV*; that the FIJM recognize Boicel as the initial founder of the Festival, and establish "a transparent consultation process with the original founders," including Boicel—all Black, but with various boundary-crossing relationships to Montreal (*SLĀV* Resistance Collective). These actions might begin to undo the erasure and disregard of Black people that are ingrained in the current modus operandi.

Nevertheless, true justice will require an even more radical upheaval. It will require the arts in Quebec, the Quebec state, and the Quebecois people more broadly to consider the kind of identity they want to claim. Shall it be an identity that continues to grasp after colonial white settler status; one defined by antiblackness (however "benevolent"), and the dispossession of Indigenous people? Or shall it be an identity that works from an understanding of its own oppression, becomes accountable for its complicities in antiblackness and dispossession, and works in solidarity toward a decolonial future? This latter option, of course, would entail an entire undoing of the coloniality at the heart of hegemonic Quebec identities, and a reconception of what it means to be Quebecois, indeed human in Quebec. With respect to Black people, this means defining Quebec identity, such that Blackness is neither its perpetual outside nor its empty metaphor. This is a radically indeterminate path, but with all its speculative potential a radically inclusive arts scene in Quebec organized on the principles above could be the place to start forging such a vision.

In the meantime, Black people will not wait. Thus, as a scholarly project, I would much rather continue to think about the ways in which Black resistance against global antiblackness can continue to find its effectiveness, and Black life can find its space to be, by defying the boundaries imposed upon it.

Notes

1 Here I make a distinction between racism against Black people, and antiblackness which is the broader ontological and epistemological process I describe here.

2 I am indebted in this piece to the work of the many Black people who spoke up and took action against *SLĀV*. I am particularly grateful for the exchanges I was able to have with Marilou Craft, who provided me invaluable information about the way in which the resistance to *SLĀV* unfolded, as well as with details about the show itself.

3 Incredibly, *SLĀV* re-opened in early 2019, claiming to have made adjustments in response to the resistance. However, at least these scenes have been altered or removed.

4 The official translation offered by Lepage on his site is "Stepping into the shoes of another." However, the translation I offer here is not only truer to the literal original French, but a better description of what happens in *SLĀV*.

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