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# HISTORICIZING WHITENESS FACTSHEET

By Madison G.B

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## FEATURED ARTICLE:

Corrie Scott (2016) "How French Canadians became White Folks, or doing things with race in Quebec"

## WITH NOTES ON:

Scott W. See (2000) "An unprecedented influx": Nativism and Irish Famine Immigration to Canada

*Death or Canada*, directed by Ruan Magan

## DEATH OR CANADA

In another source from this unit, the documentary *Death or Canada* charts the journey of the Willis family from Ireland to Toronto as a result of the Irish famine in 1847. This film is a valuable tool for portraying the horrors experienced by the victims of the famine, including the traumatic transatlantic voyage and mass sickness and death due to Typhus. However, it is important to note that the film's portrayal of Canada ultimately embracing the Irish and beginning to identify itself as a multicultural nation erases the realities of Canadian British Protestant settler's resistance to immigration, and fails to acknowledge that Irish settlement necessitated the dispossession of Indigenous lands.

The events of these articles, while discussing the oppression and racialization of French Canadian and Irish Catholic settlers in Canada, take place on the sovereign land of Indigenous peoples, and relies on the dispossession of native land.

## ON RACIALIZATION AND OTHERING

Corrie Scott argues that French Canadians, Irish, and other groups that are now typically considered 'white', and enjoy the privileges associated with whiteness, were in the nineteenth century considered "not quite white" (1285). These groups were othered by the British through a series of racializing techniques, to rationalize the subjugation of culturally or religiously different peoples. The transformation of these groups from oppressed non-white minorities to oppressive white majority reminds us that race, as a socially constructed category, is unstable and constantly changing. Scott challenges us to consider the history of French Canadians 'becoming white' as an example of the "performative technology" of race and asks us to consider the construction of whiteness, shifting the focus from what race is to what race does (1282). The construction of race is integral to the study of Canadian history as Canada's colonial history was founded on the doctrine of discovery, which relies on discrediting Indigenous peoples sovereignty over the land on the basis of racial and cultural 'inferiority'.

## CORRIE SCOTT ON FRENCH CANADIANS AS 'NOT QUITE WHITE'

French Canadians were racialized as "not quite white" by the British ruling class to argue for their assimilation into 'superior' British culture. Scott identifies nineteenth century British perception of French Canadians in Lord Durham's 1839 report on the colonial grievances against French Canadians, which uses the word race 32 times, and repeatedly characterizes the French Canadians as inferior to Anglo-Canadians (1283). Durham employs rhetoric of race that have been used against people of colour by white colonizers including being characterized as 'backward' and accused of idleness and ignorance. French Canadians were additionally racialized in nineteenth century cartoons which depicted French Canadians as monkeys or with ape-like features, appealing to biological theories of race which sought to create white superiority by othering non-whites as 'primitive humans'. One cartoon depicts a group of monkeys led by a monkey-man hybrid labeled 'Papineau' threatening a sleeping lion, representing the British monarchy.

In her analysis of the cartoon, Scott identifies a central feature of whiteness: that it must always be under threat in order to justify the steps taken by the white elites to maintain their domination. Racist discourse was applied to both the French Canadians and Irish Catholics, associating them with a "lack of self control, large families, and inadequate intelligence" (1289) to increase the threat of minority engulfment, as witnessed in the second cartoon, which depicts a giant primate like French Canadian holding a paper labeled "French Influence" crushing a sleeping light skinned man beneath him. Using Durham's report and nineteenth political cartoons, Scott argues that French Canadians were racialized by British settlers as non-white.

Scott argues that French Canadians and Irish minorities were racialized by Anglo-Canadians using some of the same techniques employed against Indigenous groups to justify colonization. She also points out the irony present, in that the same discourses used against the French Canadians were simultaneously being used by French Europeans to justify their colonial exploits in Africa and the Americas. She argues that rhetoric of race was used to make the domination and assimilation of the French Canadians seem natural and inevitable, which was also employed aggressively against Indigenous peoples in the motif of 'the dying Indian.'

## SCOTT ON HOW FRENCH CANADIANS BECAME WHITE

Scott identifies a couple of key moments in the 'whitening' of French Canadians:

- In the 1960s, Quebecois Pierre Valliere challenged Quebecois exploitation and discrimination by comparing themselves to the oppression experienced by Black Americans. This comparison is problematic because it relies on the "fetishization of an imagined black masculinity" (1291) and violence, and because it appropriates black oppression to argue for white privilege.
- Post-World War II, Canada saw a major growth in the middle class, including white Francophones, aligning them with the British on the basis of socio-economic class. This change excluded Quebecois people of colour who did not experience the same economic growth.
- The definition of Canada as bilingual and bicultural, excluding Indigenous presence and history on the land and identifying French and English as the 'real' and 'rightful' inhabitants.

These moves towards whiteness lead to French Canadians identifying themselves as white and as part of the 'western civilized nation,' thus enjoy "unearned institutional and material advantages

of being white" (1293). It also leads Scott to conclude that the instability of race as witnessed in the whitening of French Canadians is "crucial to doing things with race" and encourages both French and English Canada to confront their whiteness head on and ask ethical questions about the socio-economic inequality between groups that questions of race conceals.

## NATIVISM AND IRISH IMMIGRATION

Scott See argues in his article that the immigration of Irish Catholics following the 1840s famine sparked a powerful example of nativism by the Protestant majority towards the 'foreign' Irish Catholic minority. He too notes the ways in which Irish Catholics were racialized using the rhetoric of a "lower-order" of beings. Both See and Scott's articles focus on examples of othering towards a minority group who lobbied aggressively for representation and as such achieved 'whiteness,' in turn becoming a part of the oppressive majority. Examining the history of French Canadian and Irish Catholic discrimination reveals whiteness as a political tool used to ostracize and oppress groups. By considering the historic fluctuations of whiteness we can decentralize and denaturalize it to consider critically what race is doing in Canada.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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