

The Struggle of Others: Pierre Vallières, Quebecois Settler Nationalism, and the N-Word Today

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Cornellier argues that the journalist and Quebecois nationalist Pierre Vallières’s racial analogy in his 1968 autobiography *Nè**** Blancs d’Amérique* and his conflation of exploitation with slavery, turns race into an acquirable therefore politically insignificant category within Québec, and obscures that national liberation for Quebecois is built on the project of native dispossession.

IS NÈ*** THE N-WORD OR THE OUTDATED “NEGRO”?

Vallières has admitted that in the title of his book, he meant the English N-word, not the French word nè***, commonly defended to be less derogatory. Cornellier redacts both French and English versions of the word, in solidarity with Black colleagues, to situate himself as a Quebecois settler, but also to “take a stand” against the excuses used by his fellow Francophone Quebecois, who seek immunity in the ambiguity of the French language. Cornellier asserts that when a person uses the French N-word they “produce and designate blackness for themselves, without black people”.

RACE IN QUÉBEC

Race has been obstructed in Quebecois literary theory despite how pervasive concepts of race are in French Canadian history. Race is referenced in:

- Lord Durham’s 1839 Report on the Affairs of British North America
- Lionel Groulx’s famous 1922 novel *L’appel de la race*
- and concept of French and English as the two “founding races” of Canada.

In the 1960s, Quebec intellectuals associated with the socialist journal *Parti Pris* worked to translate the struggle of others to make sense of their place as white Colonial/Colonized people within the Anglo-American sphere. They took inspiration from the likes of Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Albert Memmi, and Édouard Glissant, as well as the Black Panthers and other Black radical circles in the US. Quebecois obsession with Black struggles can be an be partially understood as an attempt to rationalize their pursuit of independence from Canada, amid decolonization movements elsewhere. Vallières’s book, and its title, keep up the appeal of **governmental belonging** amongst white Quebecois, with little critical attention given to the troubling racial metaphor. In 2008, a reissue of the book was called the “only undisputable classic of revolutionary Quebecois literature” by an editorialist for *Le Devoir*.

GLOSSARY

- Autobiography:** communication of knowledge gained through one’s own visceral experience.
- Cultural appropriation:** an identification without empathy and therefore without the other that I am (not)
- Empathy:** to do the labour of imagining what the other is experiencing
- The epidermalization of inferiority:** when the colonized subject’s complex of inferiority transitions from a process of economic subjugation to a socio-psychological internalization of an inferiority that is then attached to their skin.
- Governmental belonging (a.k.a. allant de soi):** the feeling that one is naturally entitled to be a beneficiary for the legal and political “reshaping” of theses lands.
- Les habitants:** underprivileged Quebec peasants
- Hegemony:** the dominant status quo that is agreed upon quietly. It’s not applied onto our consciousnesses but is a part of them.
- The literary method (of delivering otherness):** which values differences and delivers us to “others” with lives unlike our own, as opposed to the rhetorical and sociophilosophical methods that value similarity and identification.
- Settler common sense:** through which the terms of law and policy gain a sense of everyday certainty.

VALLIÈRES ARGUMENTS & CORNELLIER'S COUNTERARGUMENTS

- Vallières selects episodes of Quebecois history to argue that “the exploited underclass of French Canadians aren’t merely like nè[***]s, but are themselves nè[***]s”

- Poor whites consider Black people their inferior.

- He highlights the early crossings of **les habitants**, the British conquest of 1759, the rebellions of 1837-38 and the continued exploitation of French Canadians as cheap labour.

- Cornellier critiques this narrative as leaving out the fact that this history took place on Indigenous land. Though he notes that his article is “not meant to deny the legacy of French Canadian historical struggle under a British colonial regime.”

- Vallières asks “Were they [French Canadians] not imported, like the American blacks, to serve as cheap labor in the New World?” He claims that the only difference between the Quebecois and African Americans is “the colour of their skin and the continent they came from”

- Vallières’s own text undercuts this argument. He describes early French settlers as “[o]ur ancestors [who] came here with the hope of beginning a new life.” Thus, French settlers came of their own volition, in contrast to African Americans, whose ancestors were brought to the Americas by force.

- Vallières claimed that there was no “black problem” in Quebec.

- New France and British Canada were both slave-owning societies and despite the Black activism happening in 1960s Montreal, Vallières thereby erases the existence of Black Quebecois people.

- Vallières equates exploitation with slavery.

- Cornellier outlines that the crucial difference between exploitation and enslavement is in nature, not degree. Critical race theorist Frank Wilderson defines slavery in contrast to exploitation as “accumulation and fungibility: the condition of being owned and traded.”
- He elaborates that slavery for Whites is something that is experienced, but to be Black is to already be linked to the idea of slavery.

- Vallières fails to comprehend that “systemic racial discrimination privileges even the poorest of Whites in relation to Blacks.”
- Vallières understands “freedom” as a path away from being an “N-word”.

- Cornellier calls on Fanon’s concept “**the epidermalization of inferiority**” to contend that a different “grammar of suffering” separates the white working poor from enslaved Black people.

CORNELLIER'S TAKE ON THE BOOK

Nè**** *Blancs d'Amérique* depoliticizes the whiteness of the Quebecois national reference, as well as de-racializes colonialism. Cornellier suggests that such appropriative gesturing toward blackness and the struggle of others colonized peoples by Quebecois leftist circles was a way to align Quebec with Third World decolonization, thus presenting Quebec as colonized, rather than a settler colony. Without this nuance, Vallières would have been forced to account for Quebec’s existence on Indigenous land, complicating the creation of a “free” national-statist project outside of Anglophone domination.

A SETTLER COMMON SENSE

Cornellier points out that **hegemony** is where the left and the right share a certain “structure of feeling” beyond the political spectrum. Vallières’s work draws on a **hegemony** that taps into a “settler structure of feeling” which allows settler colonial occupation and white entitlement to be felt as a given, as a banal certainty. This notion is reproduced consistently to center French Quebecois as the “natural” center of **governmental belonging**. Similarly, Mark Rifkin identifies a “**settler common sense**.” Settler colonialism and the erasure of Indigenous peoples is furthered through repeatedly talking about law and Canadian policy without taking Indigenous peoples and “Indian policy” into account.

A DEBIT SYSTEM OF SUFFERING

Cornellier notices “a debit system of suffering” in Quebec. Within this system, other colonize peoples’ “struggle would take away from my struggle by suggesting that their suffering isn’t also my suffering, or even worse: that their suffering is more intense, is worse, is more legitimate, or has moral priority over mine.” This emphasis on the part of the doubly complex Quebecois identity that is colonized, without paying attention to the part that is colonizer, feeds a “drive toward unaccountability” to indigenous nations that makes Vallières book a natural ally to the deflection that comes with discussions of race in Quebec today.

CONCLUSION & CONNECTIONS

One of the ways the settler colonial mindset has manifested itself is in the 2013 “Charter of Secularism” proposed by Premier Pauline Marois’s Parti Québécois (PQ). If implemented, this policy would have made it so that public sector employees (medical personnel and educators etc.) would not be able to wear visible religious symbols at work. The main targets of the debate were Muslim women whose hijabs have great religious importance. Despite the name of the charter, the debate was not so much about secularism, but instead about the reassertion of how French Quebecois dominance is upheld.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Autobiography adds perceived indisputability as it is the writer’s own suffering. It assumes the writer can be unaffected by hegemony. In the autobiographical chapters of Vallières’s book, the figure of the Iroquois rebel is reduced to a fantasy who Vallières relies on narratively to symbolize the alienated Quebecois-as-colonized. Vallières absented Indigenous people to allow French Quebecois to claim moral and political legitimacy as the so-called lawful originators of Québec.

A UNIVERSALIZATION OF (BR)OTHERHOOD

Cornellier focuses on the **literary method** of delivering otherness. Its assumed aim is to enhance readers’ “ethical capabilities.” Vallières’s text uses this technique not to create an empathetic relation, but instead a sense of perfect overlap. Conceiving of one’s experience through an experience that isn’t equivalent, requires the continual erasure of these “others” through which one understands oneself. Cornellier presents this as a form of **cultural appropriation**, stating that to **empathize** is not to experience someone’s suffering.

VALLIÈRES FORCED TO REVISIT HIS CENTRAL CLAIM

In his 1994 preface, Vallières was forced to go back on his original argument by then-recent events, namely, the 1990 standoff at Kanehsatake. He tried to create a universal identity of resistance and suffering, applying his titular slur to everyone. He writes “Nè[***]s blancs, francos et anglos, nè[***]s rouges, nè[***]s noirs, nè[***]s bruns, nè[***]s jaunes...” implying that all their suffering is the same.

Citation: Cornellier, Bruno. “The Struggle of Others: Pierre Vallières, Quebecois Settler Nationalism, and the N-Word Today.” *Discourse* 39.1 (Winter 2017): 31-66.