

HISTORICIZING WHITENESS

Factsheet #1 - By Julia Brown

Main Focus

This factsheet provides an overview of various works discussing the topic of historicizing whiteness, with a primary focus on Corrie Scott's article, and explains how race operated historically in Quebec during the 19th century. It will show how French Canadians were once described as “not quite white,” and how ideas of race continue to shape relationships and power structures today.

Featured Materials

Corrie Scott (2016) “How French Canadians Became White Folks, or Doing Things with Race in Quebec”

Death or Canada (2008) Directed by Ruan Magan

Bruno Cornellier (2017) “The Struggle of Others: Pierre Vallières, Quebecois Settler Nationalism, and the N-Word Today,”

Georgia Sitara (2025) “Historicizing Whiteness”

Political Cartoons

Scott examines the racist rhetoric used to discriminate against French-Canadians in Quebec, as English-Canadians told them to “speak white” as an insult to dismiss the French language, and describe them as “inferior”. In 19th-century newspapers and magazines, the English represented the French in racialized ways, illustrating them as “primates” because they were seen as sub-human compared to them. In a particular political cartoon, French-Canadians were portrayed with “ape-like” features, threatening and conspiring against a sleeping lion, a symbol of the British Monarchy. Scott points out the fact that white superiority has often been employed within these political cartoons as a way to legitimize and justify the discrimination against marginalized groups. Scott argues that, based on the way French-Canadians were depicted in these cartoons, they were racialized as “not quite white.” Governor general, Lord Durham, wrote in his 1839 report describing French Canadians with more racist rhetoric, calling them “not so civilized” and “backward,” which he believed were not characteristics of “white people.”

What is Race?

Scott's article reveals the largely ignored history of French-Canadians, who are now widely understood as white, but were once portrayed as a group that was racially inferior to English-Canadians. According to Scott, race is performative. It functions as a social construct used to define and establish hierarchies and power dynamics, while influencing identities and social interaction, in this case between the French and English Canadians. It was not just French-Canadians who were portrayed as “racially different” in history, but other white groups of people, like the Irish Catholics and Jewish communities.

Race has been used to justify the oppression and subjugation of the French-Canadians, reinforcing inequalities among these “different” social groups and how these individuals were treated and perceived. Race, in 19th-century Canada, was a term used to define a group based on their cultural heritage. Racist rhetoric characterized these French-Canadians as “backwards” and “ignorant.” Understanding not what race is, but what it does, is key to confronting the inequalities that race continues to produce to this day.

“Not Quite White”

French-Canadians were initially racialized as not white and were often marginalized and subjected to negative and discriminatory stereotypes by Anglo-Saxon Canadians. In Lord Durham’s 1839 report, he thought French-Canadians should assimilate “in the name of civilization and evolutionary progress.” He described French-Canadians as “illiterate, ignorant, and unprogressive,” which were similar characteristics used to describe other colonized people. Scott writes how the concept of race is essential to the arguments Durham made about French-Canadian assimilation, and how his derogatory terms depict this group as “inferior, ignorant, and unprogressive”. Durham’s characterization of French-Canadians reinforces this racial hierarchy that positions the English as superior, which reflects the popular mindset amongst colonialists.

Death Or Canada/Irish Catholic Immigration

The documentary, *Death or Canada*, looks into the lives and realities of the people who suffered the horrors of starvation and disease during the Great Famine in mid-19th-century Ireland. This famine lasted for 4-5 years, resulting in Ireland losing approximately one-quarter of its population. A combination of sickness and death from typhus and starvation forced millions of people to leave Ireland and search for a new life abroad. The film focuses on the Willis family and their journey to Canada during this crisis.

The British did not care about how the famine affected them and even thought the famine might do some good in forcing Irish Catholics to “change.” This relates to the historical belief that English Canadians held against French Canadians, as they perceived them as inferior due to cultural and religious differences.

How Did French Canadians Become White?

Whiteness is seen as “generic human beings not belonging to a racial grouping”, and the so-called definition of “white” has evolved over the past years. French Canadians mobilized to become white in the following ways:

- In the 1960s, Pierre Vallières challenged Quebecois class injustice and exploitation. He compared the struggle of the French-Canadians to that of the oppression the Black community faced, which was deeply problematic because it glorifies a stereotypical idea of “Black masculinity, including many harmful stereotypes.”
- And the process of “boundary blurring,” which occurred after the Second World War, as the Canadian middle class grew due to “post-war economic prosperity.” With this change came the lowering of barriers for a Francophone Quebecois, although Quebec’s socio-economic success did not make it easier for immigrants compared to Francophones.

Scott points out that race in Quebec’s racialized past has always been about socio-economic relations, which we can see through the points stated above on how French-Canadians became “white.”

Scott & Cornellier on Pierre's Manifesto

Pierre Vallières’ manifesto is attributed to the “whitening” of Quebec in the 1960s. Vallières wrote the book during his imprisonment at the Manhattan House of Detention for Men, which had a predominantly Black prison population. He compares the exploitation that French-Canadians faced in Quebec to that of slavery, arguing that French-Canadians' experience of oppression and marginalization is similar to that of Black people, despite their extreme differences. Cornellier focuses on a more inclusive discussion, one that recognizes the connections between different struggles against injustice. Throughout this source, we see how Quebec’s colonial history often ignores the experiences of marginalized groups, especially Black people in this context.

Scott also critiques Vallières manifesto, particularly his poor choice of racial rhetoric. This writing raises questions about the role race and identity play in Quebec’s socio-political environment, as Vallières tries to assert himself as a “white man.”

How Black & Indigenous Histories Have Been Erased

It's important to recognize Black and Indigenous populations in this context as their histories and struggles are often excluded from discussions on Canadian identity and citizenship. Bruno Cornellier brings up scholar David Austin, who highlights this and discusses “The Myth of the Two Founding Nations” which often ignores the experiences of these marginalized groups in Quebec's colonial history. Europeans believed they had a “right” to Indigenous lands, and they used this notion of discovery to reinforce these harmful beliefs.

Bibliography

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