
COVID-19 EFFECT ON BLACK COMMUNITIES IN QUEBEC

Johanne Jean-Pierre, Ryerson University and Tya Collins, Faculté des sciences de l'éducation, Université de Montréal | November 12, 2020

Abstract

This article examines the effects of COVID-19 on Black communities in the context of Quebec, where colour-evasiveness prevails. Since the social status of race and the history of Black populations are consistently marginalized in this province, anti-Black racism is not understood, recognized, or addressed adequately. COVID-19 has exacerbated existing inequalities concerning diverse Black communities in Quebec and has affected them disproportionately. Yet, the absence of race-based data and the pervasiveness of color-evasiveness, hinder a comprehensive study of its effects. We argue that social class and migration status allow for an insufficient understanding of Black peoples' experiences and that race must be acknowledged as a singular form of stratification. We advocate for the collection of race-based data to detect and address discrepancies and persistent barriers. Like the United Nations Human Rights Council (2017), we underscore the necessity of taking action to uphold the human rights of people of African descent, including addressing the virus of racism

COVID-19 Effect on Black Communities in Quebec

It is both timely and telling that the advent of COVID-19 falls at the midpoint of the International Decade for People of African Descent (2015-2024) proclaimed by the United Nations. As the organization is “deeply concerned by the structural racism that lies at the core of many Canadian institutions and the systemic anti-Black racism that continues to have a negative impact on the human rights situation of African Canadians”¹, we consider COVID-19 as an important opportunity to deepen our understanding of how race and racism, impact the way an epidemic affects Black communities. In contrast to the rest of Canada, Quebec provides a unique vantage point to examine this issue given its position as a French-speaking majority at a provincial level, yet a linguistic minority on a national level. As such, it is relevant to discuss race, not as a biologically defined concept, but as a socio-historically constructed social category², in order to ascertain how diverse Black communities in Quebec have been deeply affected by COVID-19.

While Quebec is part of a larger global dynamic, its socio-political and historical relationships with and within the rest of North America help us understand the process and dynamics that involve Black communities in contemporary society. As co-colonizers of what is modern-day Quebec, the descendants of French settlers have largely defined themselves as a dominated and exploited minority, under the threat of losing their language and culture, since the British conquest of the late 18th century. After decades of English dominance, the 1960's marked the beginning of French nationalism – while Indigenous communities remained marginalized at both provincial and federal levels, Quebecois settlers took their place as the demographic, linguistic and sociological majority, and established their political power and influence over their own development and governance. This period can be largely associated with the expansion of influential labour movements that sought to raise class consciousness, among which various union groups and activists defended the rights of the working class. As highlighted by Weber³, in addition to social class, social status is also a form of social stratification that shapes the distribution of power in society.. Hence, grassroots and community organizations have brought attention to inequality based on Indigeneity, gender, sexuality, language, disability, age, migration status, religion, etc. For instance, Quebec feminist movements have pushed forward gender equality, and Francophone advocates have mobilized in the interest of the survival of the French language. We contend that it is relevant to engage in an analysis

of the social status of race to further the study of social stratification in Quebec. Grasping that race and racism are non-essentialist relational constructs that vary according to social-historical and political contexts, and understanding that they are not secondary or complementary to gender or class based inequality⁴ is paramount to situating Black people's experiences of COVID-19.

Since race was an integral part of Nazi ideology and is still part of Klux Klux Klan's justification of racist violence, for some observers, race and racism are automatically equated to doing similar harm as these extremist political groups. This equation hinders an understanding of how race structures inequality as it exclusively focuses on intentional, overt and violent actions from individuals belonging to fanatical groups with a specific ideology. Because science has invalidated biological explanations of race by demonstrating that racial distinctions are not genetically discrete, reliably measurable, nor meaningful⁵, the concept has been categorically expelled from the domains of French sociology as an object of analysis. Its study mobilizes a range of euphemisms to avoid the use of the word race, such as *ethnic group*, *culture*, *national origin*, or *visible minority*⁶. In this light, many people in Quebec have been taught that it is better to ignore racial difference. This colour evasive approach⁷ is based on the claim that it is better to recognize everyone's humanity. Yet, race as a socio-historically constructed category continues to spew real negative consequences in society. Colour-evasiveness inadvertently reinforces a linear causality logic inference between acknowledging racial differences and potential discrimination, conflict, and assumptions of inherent hierarchies. This particular form of racism is actually the best way to ignore and subtly perpetuate injustice on the basis of race by referring to non-racial dynamics to explain racial inequality⁸. The existence of racism cannot be negated or minimized because of an intense wish of dissociation from publicly condemned extremist groups and historical events. If we do not name and analyze race and racism from multiple theoretical lenses, we are unable to address the ways they have and continue to structure inequality in various contexts in everyday life⁹, including the health sector. In several contexts, recognizing difference operates as a positive means of highlighting the specificity, the contribution, and the equal status of a group. For instance, the recognition of Francophones by the Canadian nation is not in and of itself Francophobe.

It can be difficult for a social group that perceives itself as a minority to recognize another minority in its midst. As a linguistic minority in North America, Quebec widely perceives persistent linguistic and cultural threats to its existence despite its position as a majority within its jurisdiction¹⁰. As such, given the significant investment towards the survival of the French language led by the majority of Quebecers over the years, there appears to be some reluctance to recognize that aside from language, race and racism are issues that need to be contended with, as they are not solely the purview of Canadian English speakers or Americans. Paradoxically, Quebec francophones have compared their struggles for liberation and social justice to those concerning anti-colonial and independence movements in Africa, and those of African Americans. The expression "nègres blancs d'Amérique" or in English "White Negroes [in some translations *Niggers*] of America" was even deployed in popular discourse in the 1960s¹¹ to reinforce this perceived social positioning. Yet, while Quebec francophones experienced subordination due to Anglo-conformity¹², their history does not consist of the racialized processes of coerced migration from their continent of origin to the Americas, followed by enslavement, segregation, ongoing dehumanization, and the denial of equal social status. In other words, despite the juxtaposition of African and African-American resistance movements to Quebec nationalist and separatist struggles in some intellectual circles, French Quebecois settlers are not Black and do not navigate society as such. Furthermore, while the "nègres blancs" analogy was being deployed, anti-racist struggles of the actual Black population residing in the province and in the rest of the country were being ignored; conveniently erasing the critique of structural racism and racial capitalism advanced by Black intellectuals¹³. Despite discrimination based on language, Quebec has not and does not evolve in isolation from the rest of the Americas. Although the historical narrative emphasizes

collaborative relationships with Indigenous nations and the conquest and rule of a British elite, Indigenous people were colonized in Quebec, Black people were enslaved and experienced anti-Black racism in this province like in other North American jurisdictions¹⁴.

Although Black people's experiences in Quebec have primarily been studied through the prism of acculturation or immigration-related challenges¹⁵, their socio-historical experiences in this province cannot be reduced to migration and the idea of the "newcomer"¹⁶. The history of Marie-Josèphe Angélique, an enslaved Black woman executed by hanging in Montreal, New France, in 1734¹⁷ is one of many examples that well exceeds those boundaries. In fact, several events throughout Quebec's history speak to anti-Black racism such as the degrading experiences of Black porters in Montreal on the Canadian railways from the end of the 19th century until the mid-eighties, including their initial exclusion from union membership¹⁸; the forgotten 1969 Sir George Williams (Concordia University today) protests denouncing anti-Black racism in the education system¹⁹; the unapologetic use of blackface by student protestors to depict their perceived position of subjugation and servility with regard to rising tuition costs in 2012²⁰; and more recently, the appropriation of sensitive parts of Black culture through highly mediatized stage production entitled SLAV, which tells the story, many would argue inappropriately, of enslaved Africans, played by an almost all-White cast. In response to the show's cancellation following protests by the Black community and its supporters, certain intellectuals argued that censorship was at play, and the production was eventually re-instated. There was clearly limited comprehension of the gravity of the longstanding colonial and racist exploitation of Black peoples' cultural work, little attention paid to the contemporary underemployment and representation of Black Quebecois artists, and their quasi-exclusion from the show²¹. Several commentators centered the show's authors' disappointment and good intentions in their desire to respect the suffering of Black people who were enslaved and few asked: When an historically marginalized group remains underrepresented and faces unequal status in the artistic world and society at large, is it not legitimate for members of this group to express their concerns regarding cultural appropriation? Whose voice is legitimate in the public space? This demonstrates how anti-Black racism has permeated multiple spheres of Quebec society and the need for a better understanding of colonization, anti-Black racism, and historically rooted unequal status. The medical and health sectors are not exempt, as can be illustrated through the experiences of the Haitian community during the eighties due to the improper associations made between them and HIV by the Red Cross²², and their disproportionate exposure to, and life-threatening circumstances in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic as it unfolds.

Colour-evasiveness and COVID-19

Quebec has been deemed the COVID-19 epicenter of Canada, as it has steadily accounted for nearly half of all cases reported and the highest fatality rate nationally according to Canadian Government authorities. Multiple analyses are ongoing in an attempt to shed light on this predication and numerous factors have been considered; from Montreal's highly concentrated population as a major city to insufficient measures mobilized to contain the virus. These endeavours have also led to the identification of populations at greater vulnerability to COVID-19, namely, the elderly, the chronically ill, the homeless, the incarcerated, the "culturally diverse", and the poor. Consistent with Quebec's dominant political stance, what has been blatantly marginalized from the discussion, is race. While various Quebecois media outlets have disseminated information on how COVID-19 has disproportionately affected Black American communities in terms of number of cases and deaths, the question of race is missing, most notably in French-language media.

Without naming race, it has been determined that existing inequalities have only been exacerbated by the current epidemic. To this point, Black communities in Quebec have one of the most concerning socio-

economic portraits in the province. Compared to the general population, their unemployment rate is twice as high and their salaries are nearly 30% inferior, which fall not only among the lowest in the province, but also in the country²³. They are overrepresented in low-status employment positions and underrepresented in decision-making bodies and higher-paying employment²⁴. They tend to experience more challenges related to property ownership and are subjected to substandard dwellings, unaffordable rents, and racial discrimination in the rental market²⁵. In the media, stereotypical information representing them as threatening or deviant is most often selected and propagated²⁶. This stigmatization is reflected in their relationships with law enforcement and other social agencies. Black communities are subjected to over-surveillance, racial profiling, police brutality, incarceration in ways that are disproportionate and distinct from any other group²⁷. Similarly, Black children are overrepresented in youth protection agencies, detention centers, and prisons²⁸. Added to this, is their educational profile marked by over-policing, racial profiling, excessive punitive measures, special education overrepresentation, and high school perseverance challenges²⁹.

Regardless of gender, language, age, or whether they are newcomers, Quebec-born immigrants, or from long-standing generations, Black Quebecers have been contending with social inequalities for many decades. Hidden behind the widespread terms of *ethno-culturally diverse*, *immigrant*, or *visible minority communities*, we can partially ascertain the effects of COVID-19 on Black communities. Their increased vulnerability to contracting the virus is made evident in their significant presence in the health field, where they are likely to occupy positions such as client-care attendants, aids, and cleaners. In fact, one third of Black women in the country work in healthcare³⁰. The circulation of COVID-19 in predominantly Black populated neighbourhoods such as Côte-des-Neiges–Notre-Dame-de-Grâce and Montreal-Nord are also cause for concern. In addition to the disproportionately high instances of the virus, the privilege of practicing protective measures against it such as social-distancing, is not a *fait acquis* where the typical household in these boroughs may produce overcrowding and consist of dilapidated structures involving poor ventilation. While COVID-19 has shifted the typical media coverage of Montreal-Nord from high crime and gang-related violence, it has not reduced the likelihood of its residents' engagement with the police. A report issued by the Canadian Civil Liberties Association³¹ shows that Quebec is also leading the country in terms of fining people who are not respecting physical distance protocol and Black people are among the groups most targeted. The enforcement of measures to contain the virus also affect Black children who are disproportionately placed in youth-protection, as parental-visitation was suspended as a precautionary measure. Schooling inequalities are also aggravated through complicated facilitation of distance-learning due to difficult access to the internet and other resources.

Amidst the unprecedented COVID-19 canvas, researchers in Quebec are engaged in work on a plethora of topics including its effect on mental health, financial well-being, tourism, etc. The crisis in long-term health care facilities has prompted expeditious action intended to improve this problematic situation that has resulted in inhumane conditions for their residents and high death tolls³². However, despite similar situations experienced by Black people as they are overrepresented in frontline, low status positions in health care, there are no plans for such actions to be taken concerning these communities in Quebec, assumingly because race remains contested as a social category and thus, no data that officially names race is available. Recently, the COVID-19 related death of Marcelin François, an asylum seeker occupying one of these high risk jobs, was widely publicized in the media³³, with no mention of the fact that he was Black. Similarly, Quebec recorded its youngest COVID-19 fatality on August 16th, 2020. The fact that nineteen-year-old Don Béni Kabangu Nsapu was Black was also omitted from the narrative³⁴. The absence of race-based data in Quebec hinders a thorough investigation of the role of race and racism in relation to COVID-19, even though the commonality of blackness across various detrimental situations is undeniable. Racism negatively affects Black peoples' health³⁵ and experiences of discrimination within healthcare settings

impact Indigenous and racialized populations³⁶. Race is in fact, a recognized social determinant of health given the discrimination that can be experienced by racial groups ascribed with lower status³⁷. These experiences can also fuel reluctance among these groups to seek healthcare, further compounding the effects of COVID-19. Thus, the need to rigorously study the social status of race, racialization processes, and various contextualized manifestations of racism, including anti-Black racism, is as important in Quebec as it is in the rest of North America. This could inform an effective and comprehensive anti-racist policy, co-designed with grassroots and community organizations, with the goal of addressing racism specifically (as opposed to only focusing on inclusive diversity or interculturalism)³⁸, and saving lives.

Conclusion

Social class and migration status are relevant objects of study but are insufficient to comprehend why Black people in several jurisdictions are more likely to contract COVID-19 than the rest of the population³⁹. Similarly to sexism or linguicism, racism in its different forms requires attentive theoretical and empirical study by recognizing race as a meaningful and significant social status and social category. Understanding racism as a singular form of stratification is necessary to contextualize and analyze its subtle and insidious manifestations. We cannot only focus on overt caricatural or extraordinary occurrences of racism, especially anti-Black racism. In fact, we still live with the consequences of the colonial slave trade, segregation, and the dehumanization of Black people in the Americas through the media, in our language, popular culture, and stereotypes. We therefore support the call to action made by the United Nations Human Rights Council⁴⁰ concerning the need for race-based data collection and the attention to Black Canadians' human rights. In Quebec, several public reports include a gendered analysis to assess the impact of different policies on women. By collecting race-based data, we could do the same with race, to better address the discrepancies and persistent access barriers of various groups, including health disparities. While the medical community is scrambling to contain, control and immunize against the COVID-19 virus, we echo the sentiments of well-known Haitian-Quebecois novelist Dany Laferrière that the *virus of racism* is just as urgent.

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