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### **Room at the Top: cultural bodies in Quebec lack any meaningful minority representation – an article on racism re French and Canada by Julian Samuel**

Why are there no visible minorities in key positions at Quebec cultural institutions? Why is Quebec decades behind the rest of Canada on this? Does the mostly all-white local media actively block a public discussion on this issue?

Many Quebecers will contest the charge of racism by mentioning the following famous minorities: Michaëlle Jean, Nathalie Chung, Norman Brathwaite, Gregory Charles, and Dany Laferrière. Racism within Quebec's cultural institutions? Unadulterated codswallop. However, Michaëlle Jean and Nathalie Chung, both RDI newsreaders, are not in key positions; they have little or no influence on the content of the broadcasts. They are stunningly overpaid newsreaders, inoffensive electrons decaying in front of your eyes. Occasionally, Michaëlle Jean does programs on Cuba that Jesse Helms would like. Norman Brathwaite and Gregory Charles are comics who illustrate a hollow pluralism.

International comparisons are relevant. Visible-minority journalists on the United Kingdom's BBC and Channel Four do programs that criticize the British government on issues such as England's racism. Journalist Darcus Howe, and film-makers John Akomfrah and Tariq Ali are among several who have provided the public with critical and entertaining television. The British South Asian comedy serial, *Goodness Gracious Me* is vicious anti-racist satire. Nothing like it here, not for a lack of talent, either.

What is the advantage of having minorities in decision-making positions? Is there not a risk that things will remain the same? The Canadian track record is not very exciting. However, along with the risk of visible minorities turning out to be dull, there is a slight chance that aspects of a newer more varied political culture could move into the public arena. Europe is ahead of us. The risks outweigh the continued dull, cultural conservatism of our white elites (who protect their jobs tooth and claw). Montreal is a multiracial, multilingual society, yet the following cultural institutions in Montreal remain lily white up at the top. 17 per cent of the tax base is multiracial -- not white anglo nor francophone.

Cultural institutions:

- CBC English radio. Patricia Pleszczynska, head of English Programming for Quebec, says there is one visible minority in a total of seven key positions. All the key positions in

local CBC radio programs such the morning program Day Break and the afternoon show Home Run are white.

- Radio Canada; director of public relations Marie Gendron (French services) said that out of 512 directors and managers 14 are visible minorities (2.73 per cent)

- Cinémathèque Québécoise, an institution which programmes films, videos, hosts conferences is all white. The programming is done by six white men: Robert Daudelin, Marco de Blois, Dominique Dugas, Alain Gauthier, Pierre Jutras and Pierre Véronneau. This institution has one black technician.

- Montreal cultural weeklies Hour, Voir, ICI, and Montreal Mirror on average have about 4-6 key editorial positions of which none are visible minorities.

- Conseil des Arts et des Lettres du Québec, a PQ principal arts funder, has five key positions and 50 employees: not a single visible minority in any category.

- Ex-Centris, a private arts institution devoted to film, video and new media, has six key positions; one is held by a visible minor, says Sylvie De Lorimier, director of public relations.

- The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (the largest museum in Quebec); Stéphane Aquin, a curator at this museum, says that all key positions, including the museums acquisitions committee, are held by whites.

- Musée d'Art Contemporain. Marcel Brisebois, chief curator, says there are six curators and 13 trustees. He refuses to say whether there are any visible minorities at the institution. I know from (regular) personal contact with this institution that there are no visible minorities in curatorial positions.

- The National Film Board of Canada. Suzanne Cote, Training and Equity Advisor, says that there are 12 visible minorities employees in key positions: 9.4% of the total number of 127 employees.

- Societe de Developpement des Entreprises Culturelles (SODEC). This major provincial film funder does not have any visible minorities in seven key positions, such as directors of sections. And, out of a total of 102 employees there are three visible minorities in technical positions says Nancy Belanger, head of public relations.

- Telefilm Canada. This organization is a major federal funder for films. Jeanine Basile, Communications et Public Affairs Attaché, says out of seven directors of departments there are no visible minorities. And there are 4 members of visible minority groups on staff which consists of 135 people.

Why has this absence of visible minorities not been discussed in the media? In Quebec, decision-makers in most media outlets are white. Blacks appear on the covers of the alternative weeklies if they can rap or do house, but there is little substantive coverage of the issue of racism in Quebec cultural institutions.

On 8 December, 1998, Radio Canada's *Le Point* had Stéphane Bureau interview tame playwright René-Daniel Dubois who spouted childishly about Quebec being fascist. Radio-Canada has not yet let visible minority intellectuals have the same extended interview time - 18 minutes and 30 seconds - Dubois had to discuss Quebec's reluctance to include *les autres* in key cultural positions. Are only white intellectuals allowed to criticize Quebec culture?

The inexorable exclusion of minorities from key positions within cultural institutions is due to the tribal desire to pass on the best jobs to incumbent white elites, friends and family members. By the inclusion of critical and talented (not token) minorities, Quebec could produce a challenging and refined internationalized culture. Of course, the status quo point-of-view in films, novels and the plastic arts et cetera would drastically change. This change is exactly what the elites are worried about. If things are played out fairly, they will have to relinquish the easy access they have to funding and jobs. In other countries, critical and talented minorities have produced landmark films such as *My Beautiful Laundrette* (UK; Stephan Fears and Hanif Kureishi, 1986) and *Mama, There's a Man in Your Bed* (France; Directed by: Coline Serreau, 1989); and novels like Caryl Philips's *The Nature of Blood* (UK, 1997), and Salman Rushdie's 1988 *Satanic Verses*. Are our traditional white cultural elites going to produce challenging and innovative works on this level?

Quebec culture would be irreversibly altered if creative visible minorities were allowed to have a say in the direction of cultural production. By maintaining the status quo, only white Quebec will benefit; the exclusion of minorities will make for bitterness and stagnation.

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