

Shame Face? The Justin Trudeau Blackface Scandal, Multicultural Performativity, Privilege, and Power

Alexandra Dobrowolsky & Bethany Leal-Iyoupe***

This study probes the Charter's representations and repercussions over time, specifically in relation to section 27, which enshrines Canada's multicultural heritage. Multiculturalism, an oft-cited symbol of Canadian national identity and inclusiveness, is instead shown to be an exercise in performativity, power, and privilege through a careful examination of the disjunctures between Liberal leader and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's public imagery, and a pre-2019 federal election scandal that erupted when grainy photos of a young, costumed Trudeau in "blackface" became public, potentially disrupting his careful and calculated framing as a ground-breaking progressive committed to diversity. A consideration of the Trudeau "brand," a brief history of blackface, and an overview and analysis of select media coverage around the scandal provide a telling tale of Canada's problematic performativity around multiculturalism and epitomize the thinness of its patina of egalitarianism. Rather than representing a reflection on the individual, incidental, or idiosyncratic nature of the incident, the anatomy of this scandal

Cette étude examine les représentations et les répercussions de la Charte au fil du temps, plus particulièrement en ce qui concerne l'article 27, qui consacre l'héritage multiculturel du Canada. Le multiculturalisme, un symbole souvent cité comme exemple de l'identité nationale canadienne et de l'inclusion, y est plutôt présenté comme un exercice de performativité, de pouvoir et de privilège, grâce à un examen minutieux des contradictions entre l'image publique du chef libéral et premier ministre Justin Trudeau et le scandale qui a éclaté avant les élections fédérales de 2019, lorsque des photos d'un jeune Trudeau costumé en « blackface » ont été rendues publiques, ce qui a compromis son image prudente et calculée de progressiste révolutionnaire engagé dans la diversité. Un examen de la « marque » Trudeau, une brève histoire du « blackface », ainsi qu'une vue d'ensemble et une analyse d'une partie de la couverture médiatique autour du scandale fournissent un récit révélateur de la performativité problématique du Canada en matière de multiculturalisme et illustrent la

* Professor, Department of Political Science, Saint Mary's University. Bethany Leal-Iyoupe, Saint Mary's University Undergraduate Research Assistant, Summer 2020.

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epitomizes the paradoxical and contradictory contemporary evocations of section 27 in which multiculturalism serves as a form of legitimation that is ultimately exclusionary.

faiblesse de son apparence égalitariste. Plutôt que de représenter une réflexion sur la nature individuelle, accidentelle ou idiosyncrasique de l'incident, l'anatomie de ce scandale démontre les évocations contemporaines paradoxales et contradictoires de l'article 27, dans lesquelles le multiculturalisme devient une forme de légitimation qui, en fin de compte, procède par l'exclusion.

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I. Introduction

The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*' fortieth anniversary provides an opportune moment to reflect on its representations, resonances, and repercussions over time, and this study does so through a circumscribed consideration of its ideals and imagery.¹ In the early 1980s, Pierre Elliot Trudeau (PET), along with numerous equality seekers, recognized the *Charter*'s potential as a symbol of national identity. Its commitments to egalitarianism and diversity, especially, proceeded to become part of this country's national imaginary and its normative framework. Beyond the inclusion of race, ethnic origin, and colour — along with religion, sex, age, and mental and physical disability — under equality rights in section 15(1), section 27 committed the Canadian state to the preservation and enhancement of the country's multicultural heritage, and has since served as a signifier of Canada's progressivism and cultural benevolence.² Of course, multicultural theories and practices have always been contested, just as their articulations in the Canadian context have changed over time. Indeed, multiculturalism has been deployed by different political actors to different political ends, often benefitting certain sectors of Canadian society, and typically belying this country's settler colonial, racist, xenophobic, and exclusionary past, and present.

In this article, however, the performativity of Canadian multiculturalism today, and how it benefits some to the exclusion of others, is highlighted through a focus on Liberal leader and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. His strategic promotion of discourses of diversity and dominant media portrayals' perpetuation of the latter appear in sharp contrast to the pervasive and material evidence of Trudeau's racially based inequality. Here, a dissection of the racist 2019 Trudeau blackface scandal spotlights the dissonant realities at play. This study, therefore, is about more than branding and blackface, and shows how section 27 of the *Charter* and Canada's commitment to multiculturalism are not only invoked rhetorically, but become exercises in legitimation, wielded by those with political power alongside their apologies and disclosures of privilege.

To elaborate, given Canada's brokerage party tendencies,³ party leaders have always played a central and starring role in politics writ large, but

1 Part I of the *Constitution Act, 1982*, being Schedule B to the *Canada Act 1982* (UK), 1982, c 11 [*Charter*].

2 *Ibid*, ss 15(1), 27.

3 R Kenneth Carty, "Brokerage Parties, Brokerage Politics" in Richard Johnson & Campbell Sharman, eds, *Parties and Party Systems, Structure and Context* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2015) 13 at 15-29. On the

this leader-focus, conjoined with identity-centrism, has recently intensified. Leaders' discourses and use of imagery and visuals now not only serve as significant voting determinants but are also pervasive and powerful forces in the mobilization of political meaning. Political figures deploy imagery to define or brand themselves, and their opponents, "often in ways that will be beneficial to them during their campaigns."⁴ The reliance on and dissemination of images works hand in hand with the "construction and circulation of narratives — also known as visual rhetoric — designed to appeal to, mobilize and persuade ... publics."⁵

When Justin Trudeau assumed leadership of a flagging Liberal Party in 2013 and then became prime minister in 2015, the predominant messaging was that this was an attractive, dynamic, and progressive young leader intent on promoting Canada's purported egalitarianism. Trudeau not only championed the 1982 *Charter* — especially its provisions around equality and multiculturalism — but also strategically adopted "diversity is our strength" as a recurring slogan. This provided a deliberate foil to his predecessor, the stiff and steely Conservative PM Stephen Harper, who distanced himself in words and deeds from earlier liberal/Liberal Party ideals over the course of three terms in office (2006-2015).

Trudeau's personal imagery worked to complement these narratives in party platforms and stylized selfies and tweets that reinforced an appealing, compassionate persona, and a leader highly attuned to equality deserving groups. Conscious and concerted visuals reinforced inclusivity and tolerance: Trudeau handing a winter coat to a newly arrived Syrian refugee child; taking a selfie with a beaming young woman wearing a hijab; marching in pride parades; taking a knee at a BLM rally. Such portrayals encompassed a combination of "ethos" evoking the political leader's image; "pathos" generating emotions and affect; and "logos" mobilizing cognitive strategies that not only require well thought-out framing and marketing, but also rely on credibility.⁶

pivotal role of leaders, see Amanda Bittner, *Platform or Personality? The Role of Party Leaders in Elections* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

4 Vincent Raynauld & Dany Renaud, "Political Advertisers" in Alex Marland & Thierry Giasson, eds, *Inside the Campaign: Managing Elections in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2020) 173 at 177.

5 Mireille Lalancette & Vincent Raynauld, "The Power of Political Image: Justin Trudeau, Instagram and Celebrity Politics" (2019) 63:7 *American Behavioral Scientist* 888 at 891.

6 *Ibid.*, citing Marie José Drolet, Mireille Lalancette & Marie-Ève Caty, *ABC de l'argumentation. Pour les professionnels de la santé et toute autre personne qui souhaite convaincre* (Québec: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2015).

These representations made the grainy photo released on September 18, 2019 — of a smiling Trudeau, wearing a turban, “doing a minstrel-y take on Arabian nights,”⁷ with his face and one visible hand blackened — all the more shocking. In Canada, contemporary blackface refers to the act in which “white and other non-Black persons darken their skin artificially to temporarily represent Black persons — almost always in the purported context of humour.”⁸ This was precisely what had apparently taken place. Just weeks before the October 21 election, this photo, and two others that followed in rapid succession, added a disturbing new dimension to Trudeau’s image/imagery. The black/brownface scandal, as it came to be known, caused an “international sensation.”⁹ At best, it would be disruptive to the careful and calculated framing of a “woke” prime minister¹⁰ and, at worst, it depicted a demeaning form of racial discrimination that would discredit Trudeau and prove disastrous to the Liberals.

Yet, the “torrent of righteous and angry column inches aimed at Justin Trudeau” soon “slowed to a trickle,” the polls “hiccupped,” and then the election campaign proceeded “as though nothing had happened.”¹¹ Trudeau’s ethos, pathos, and logos persevered to the extent that the Liberals succeeded in forming a minority government in 2019, unlike the 2015 majority government they had held previously. Trudeau continued to serve as MP for Papineau, and as prime minister again, after yet another election in 2021. This raises many questions, but the present study is propelled by three: What does this scandal say about the progressive framing of Justin Trudeau and to what extent did it tarnish the so-called Trudeau “brand”?; What does the media and public response to these incidences of black/brownface tell us about Canada’s reputed multiculturalism and equality?; And are these first two questions and the answers to them somehow interrelated?

The position taken here is that deeper scrutiny of this scandal and its repercussions provide a telling tale of Canada’s problematic performativity around multiculturalism and epitomize the thinness of its patina of egalitarianism. A

7 Martin Patriquin, “Cringe-inducing blackface a firing offence? Seems not”, *Montreal Gazette* (25 September 2019), online: <montrealgazette.com/opinion/columnists/martin-patriquin-tinge-inducing-blackface-a-firing-offence-seems-not> [perma.cc/R9WH-9BAF].

8 Philip SS Howard, “A Laugh for the National Project: Contemporary Canadian Blackface Humour and its Constitution Through Canadian Anti-blackness” (2018) 18:6 *Ethnicities* 843 at 844 [Howard, “National Project”].

9 Christopher Dornan, “The Unspoken Election: The Context of the Campaign” in Jon H Pammett & Christopher Dornan, eds, *The Canadian Federal Election of 2019* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2020) 3 at 10.

10 Kaila Jefferd-Moore, “What happened to Justin Trudeau, the feminist? After four years of the current PM’s leadership, we look back on past promises and party lines”, *This Magazine* 53:2 (1 October 2019).

11 Patriquin, *supra* note 7.

consideration and contextualization of the Trudeau brand, a brief review of the history of blackface, and an overview and analysis of a selection of media responses to the scandal, in one national and two local papers, illustrate not only the abdications and absolutions of Trudeau — the result of his many privileges and powers (including race, gender, and class dominance) — but also mark dramatic disjunctures regarding multiculturalism, given the erasures of racism at work. Rather than constituting a reflection on an individual, incidental, or idiosyncratic incident, then, this anatomy of a scandal represents the contemporary, strategic use of section 27, and sheds light on its ultimately exclusionary effects.

II. The Trudeau Brand

When news of the blackface photos broke, New Democratic Party (NDP) leader, Jagmeet Singh, questioned “Who is the real Mr Trudeau?”¹² In this regard, while a “definitive description” is an impossibility,¹³ there are several prominent features of Trudeau that merit consideration, beginning with his inextricable links to his father, former Prime Minister, Pierre Elliot Trudeau (PET).¹⁴

PET, an almost mythical figure in Canadian politics, is today both deified and demonized. Stephen Harper’s Conservatives were in the latter camp, delegitimizing institutions, ideas, and identities associated with PET, including the *Charter* and paths to equality seeking, as evidenced by Harper’s swift closure of the Court Challenges Program (CCP).¹⁵ After three consecutive Harper Conservative governments, Canada’s reputation for inclusivity, at home and abroad, had diminished markedly, and Justin Trudeau was well positioned to build on his father’s cachet to proclaim: “Canada is back.”

12 Marieke Walsh & Michelle Carbert, “Trudeau apologizes for racist brownface photo from 2001, acknowledges second incident in high school”, *The Globe and Mail* (18 September 2019), online: <www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-trudeau-apologizes-for-racist-brownface-photo-from-2001-acknowledges/> [perma.cc/EP4G-8TSZ]; David McGrane & Anne McGrath, “National Campaign Directors” in Alex Marland & Thierry Giasson, eds, *Inside the Campaign: Managing Elections in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2020) 135 at 143.

13 Alex Marland, “The Brand Image of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in International Context” (2018) 24:2 *Can Foreign Policy J* 139 at 139 [Marland, “Brand Image”].

14 Frédéric Boily, *De Pierre à Justin Trudeau. Portrait de famille de l'idéologie du Parti libéral du Canada, 1968-2013* (Québec: Presses de Université Laval, 2014); Alex Marland, *Brand Command: Canadian Politics and Democracy in the Age of Message Control* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016) at 126-134; Alexandra Dobrowolsky, “A Diverse, Feminist, ‘Open Door’ Canada? Trudeau-Styled Equality, Liberalisms and Feminisms” in Fiona MacDonald & Alexandra Dobrowolsky, eds, *Turbulent Times and Transformational Possibilities? Gender and Politics Today and Tomorrow* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020) 23 [Dobrowolsky, “Open Door”].

15 Alexandra Dobrowolsky, “The Sad but True Story of a Shrinking Equality Opportunity Structure” in Lois Harder & Steve Patten, eds, *Patriation and Its Consequences: Constitution Making in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2015) 290 at 290.

There are several notable parallels in both style and substance between father and son, along with a few key differences. The former, like the latter, epitomized a “‘hip,’ ‘with it,’ and ‘cool’”¹⁶ break from the stuffy politicians preceding him. Pierre Elliot had “sex appeal embodied [in] a mod subculture of trendy music, stylish suits, pop art and a cosmopolitan world outlook in a country that was breaking free from its colonial roots,”¹⁷ with Trudeauania¹⁸ cementing a then unparalleled celebrity status at home and abroad. As Trudeau’s first-born son, Justin’s celebritization started at birth, and he too would go on to have the looks and star power,¹⁹ to mingle with celebrities, and to grace the cover of magazines.²⁰

Justin Trudeau, however, lacked gravitas. The snowboard instructor became a high school teacher, but his left as a serious political contender still required solidifying, and thus an infamous 2012 boxing match against an equally young and good looking but Conservative-appointed Indigenous Senator, Patrick Brazeau, was presumably intended to convey the message that Justin was no mere lightweight. Unpacking the colonialist metaphors here — including Trudeau’s visible Indigenous-styled tattoo, which evinced debates over appropriation — merits a whole other article. Trudeau’s reasoning behind this spectacle, as explained in a 2017 *Rolling Stone* magazine story, is revealing. “I wanted someone who would be a good foil,” Trudeau said, “and we stumbled upon the scrappy tough-guy senator from an indigenous community. He fit the bill, and it was a very nice counterpoint. I saw it as the right kind of narrative.”²¹ The denouncements came fast and furious. For instance, reactions on Twitter included: “White guy in power & entitlement looks 4 an #Indigenous human to beat up so he looks like a strong white dude. How precious & colonial supreme” and “What is up @JustinTrudeau after all your talk of inclusion you brag about beating up a guy with the issues you swore to address.”²²

16 Michael S Whittington, “The Prime Minister, Cabinet, and the Executive Power in Canada” in Michael Whittington & Glen Williams, eds, *Canadian Politics in the 21st Century*, 7th ed (Toronto: Thomson Nelson, 2008) 28 at 46.

17 Marland, “Brand Image”, *supra* note 13 at 140.

18 Paul Litt, *Trudeauania* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016).

19 Shannon Proudfoot, “Selling a PM: The marketing of Justin Trudeau”, *Maclean’s* (11 August 2016), online: <www.macleans.ca/politics/ottawa/marketing-justin-trudeau/> [perma.cc/9DV8-PZE2].

20 Richard Nimijean, “A Portrait of Justin Trudeau”, *The Monitor* (24 August 2017), online: <policyalternatives.ca/publications/monitor/portrait-justin-trudeau/> [perma.cc/L8UE-ELQV].

21 Ashifa Kassam, “‘Privileged’ Justin Trudeau accused of colonialist attitude over boxing match”, *The Guardian* (27 July 2017), online: <www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/27/justin-trudeau-rolling-stone-boxing-match-indigenous-people> [perma.cc/9DT9-5RAB].

22 *Ibid.*

Despite this controversy, Trudeau nonetheless went on to resuscitate the party, overcoming Conservatives' "just not ready" efforts to discredit him as well as ongoing concerns around inordinate style and insufficient substance. Previous Liberal leaders had invoked PET "Just Society" themes, but Justin was uniquely positioned to capitalize on the "Trudeau brand." On the one hand, even Conservative commentators acceded that his "energetic and engaging style ... turned the tide," and was instrumental in the party winning the 184 of 338 seats that led to a majority government.²³ On the other hand, the media still focused on the fluff. Britain's *Daily Mirror* declared Trudeau the "sexiest politician in the world," while both *Vogue* and the *New York Times* magazines published "glowing profiles,"²⁴ and a *GQ* feature story described Justin as both "chill" and hot like his father, but with a "flowing mane" that gave *Game of Thrones* character "Jon Snow a run for his money."²⁵

Paradoxically, Justin was also billed as "just a regular guy (kind of),"²⁶ which could be attributed to his preferred political communication strategies. Face-to-face townhall fora, and social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram, circumvented "traditional media intermediaries" and appealed to the public "in Canada and internationally in highly personalized ways."²⁷ In this respect, Trudeau evidently learned from and leveraged Barack Obama's successful "textbook social media campaign."²⁸ The American President later joked he was now usurped in the youthful, good looks department,²⁹ while Trudeau's storming of social media earned him the moniker of the "selfie Prime Minister."³⁰

23 Bill Black, "Upping the ante on spending in ultimate anti-campaign", *SaltWire* (19 October 2019), online: <www.saltwire.com/nova-scotia/opinion/bill-black-upping-the-ante-on-spending-in-ultimate-anti-campaign-365045/> [perma.cc/L22S-RUF3].

24 Simon Houpt, "Trudeau has lost control of the image he built for himself", *The Globe and Mail* (19 September 2019), online: <www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/article-trudeau-built-an-image-for-himself-now-he-faces-the-daunting-task-of/> [perma.cc/8JL7-ADHY].

25 Liza Corsillo, "Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was once just a chill snowboard instructor", *GQ Magazine* (11 March 2016), online: <www.gq.com/story/justin-trudeau-snowboard-instructor-canada-tbt> [perma.cc/JR5A-A6E9].

26 *Ibid.*

27 Lalancette & Raynauld, *supra* note 5 at 889.

28 Tamara A Small, "Two Decades of Digital Party Politics in Canada: An Assessment" in Alain-G Gagnon & A Brian Tanguay, eds, *Canadian Parties in Transition*, 4th ed (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017) 388 at 388.

29 Chris Hannay, "Obama jokes about Trudeau: 'He is so handsome'", *The Globe and Mail* (2 May 2016), online: <www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/obama-jokes-about-trudeau-he-is-so-handsome/article29820394/> [perma.cc/7QV7-4S3L].

30 Chaseten Remillard, Lindsey M Bertrand & Alina Fisher, "The Visually Viral Prime Minister: Justin Trudeau, Selfies, and Instagram" in David Taras & Richard Davis, eds, *Power Shift? Political Leadership and Social Media* (Abingdon UK: Routledge, 2019) 63 at 63.

This “bromance” with Obama was followed by a rocky relationship with President Donald J Trump, who decried Trudeau and dismissed him as “weak.”³¹ However, Trump’s bullying masculinity, misogyny, and racism were cleverly counterposed by Trudeau (as he had done with Harper and his successor, Andrew Scheer), by countering Trump’s illiberalism, nationally and internationally, with a more positive, progressive persona, albeit one that downplayed Trudeau’s own multiple privileges in terms of class, race, gender, and sexuality.

Granted, both Trudeaus also appealed to the public with their trailblazing mix of liberal policy priorities and *Charter* associations. In particular, Pierre is remembered for declaring that the state should stay out of the bedrooms of the nation in regards to issues of homosexuality, contraception, and abortion, and his innovations around multiculturalism (in policy and the Constitution) and the adoption of expansive *Charter* equality clauses³² arguably contributed to changing Canada’s identity and self-perception.³³ As for Justin, he promptly reinstated the CCP, took a strong pro-choice stance,³⁴ wooed young voters by decriminalizing marijuana,³⁵ and courted LGBTQ2 communities.³⁶ His approach to federalism and nationhood, moreover, appeared more reconciliatory vis-à-vis Quebec and Indigenous peoples than his father’s. Additionally, 2015 marked “the first time in Canadian history [that] a male head of government openly and insistently declared himself a feminist,”³⁷ with Trudeau’s particular version of feminism³⁸ on display in a range of policy choices — from cabinet

31 Robert Fife, “Trump calls Trudeau ‘dishonest and weak,’ instructs US officials not to endorse G7 communique”, *The Globe and Mail* (9 June 2019), online: <www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-trump-says-g7-countries-treat-us-like-a-piggy-bank-to-be-robbed/> [<https://perma.cc/TA8C-D3QA>].

32 *Charter* gains reflected long, hard work on the part of social movements, but Trudeau senior nonetheless provided political opportunities for equality seekers and Trudeau junior promised to re-open political pathways closed off under Harper.

33 Samuel V La Selva, “Understanding Canada’s Origins: Federalism, Multiculturalism, and the Will to Live Together” in James Bickerton & Alain G Gagnon, eds, *Canadian Politics*, 6th ed (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014) 3.

34 Dobrowolsky, “Open Door”, *supra* note 14 at 23.

35 Boily, *supra* note 14.

36 Justin Trudeau was the first Canadian prime minister to march in a pride parade, apologize for the federal government’s discriminatory acts towards LGBTQ2 individuals, provide funds to LGBTQ2 service organizations and international groups, establish a new LGBTQ2 commissioner/office, and launch a legislative initiative around gender identity and conversion therapy.

37 Pascale Dangoisse & Gabriela Perdomo, “Gender Equality Through a Neoliberal Lens: A Discourse Analysis of Justin Trudeau’s Official Speeches” (2021) 44:3 *Women’s Studies Communication* 419 at 419.

38 Jeanette Ashe, “Gender Sensitivity under Trudeau: Facebook Feminism or Real Change?” in Fiona MacDonald & Alexandra Dobrowolsky, eds, *Turbulent Times, Transformational Possibilities? Gender and Politics Today and Tomorrow* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020) 68; Stephanie Paterson & Francesca Scala, “Feminist Government or Governance Feminism? Exploring Feminist Policy Analysis

composition and social policy to budgets and foreign policy. All of which served to enhance the Trudeau trademark of embodying diversity and tolerance.³⁹

Yet, it was not long before gaps, inconsistencies, and deconstructions of this imagery appeared.⁴⁰ Jefferd-Moore, for instance, reflected on the fact that “a male appointing an equal cabinet with representation based on the binary does not a feminist make.” As Jefferd-Moore continued: Trudeau’s “brand of shallow, white feminism . . . doesn’t address the underlying injustices that further gender inequality.”⁴¹ In this sense, Trudeau’s feminist pronouncements either lacked real substance⁴² or epitomized a problematic neoliberal-inspired governance feminism.⁴³ Taking the knee did little to tackle systemic racism; the creation of a LGBTQ2 Secretariat in the Privy Council Office was undercut by shifting it to a line department (Canadian Heritage and now Women and Gender Equality and Youth); and neoliberal continuities with the Harper agenda became more apparent in the immigration realm.⁴⁴

Trudeau’s penchant for performance was also problematized with a February 2018 official trip to India to announce a billion-dollar investment deal. The Prime Minister brought his family along, and their “insistence on consistently donning traditional Indian attire . . . [began drawing] less than flattering attention.” Writing for *Global News*, Marilisa Racco noted that their performance had been dubbed “too Indian, even for an Indian,” with the Trudeaus commissioning “some of India’s most prestigious designers to outfit them for every photo op.”⁴⁵

The disconnects intensified with the 2018-2019 SNC-Lavalin affair, which raised issues of transparency and ethics and resulted in the ousting of Jody Wilson-Raybould and Jane Philpott from both Trudeau’s cabinet and the Liberal Party. Their treatment called into question Trudeau’s feminism and il-

in the Trudeau Era” in Fiona MacDonald & Alexandra Dobrowolsky, eds, *Turbulent Times, Transformational Possibilities? Gender and Politics Today and Tomorrow* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020) 49.

39 Allen Alexandre, “Trudeau, George Floyd, and the emergence of Black Canadian identity”, *The Toronto Star* (16 February 2021), online: <www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/2021/02/16/trudeau-george-floyd-and-the-emergence-of-black-canadian-identity.html> [perma.cc/Q28L-26UL].

40 Houpt, *supra* note 24.

41 Jefferd-Moore, *supra* note 10.

42 Ashe, *supra* note 38.

43 Dobrowolsky, “Open Door”, *supra* note 14; Paterson & Scala, *supra* note 38; Boily, *supra* note 14.

44 Alexandra Dobrowolsky, “Bad versus Big Canada: State Imaginaries of Immigration and Citizenship” (2017) 98:2 *Studies in Political Economy* 197.

45 Marilisa Racco, “Trudeau family criticized for overdoing it on their traditional Indian outfits”, *Global News* (21 February 2018), online: <globalnews.ca/news/4037948/trudeau-family-criticized-for-indian-outfits/> [perma.cc/9K94-3JV3].

luminated the limits of Liberal discourses around reconciliation and nation-to-nation governance, as Wilson-Raybould had been appointed as Canada's first Indigenous Minister of Justice.

In sum, Trudeau's image was already less shiny and new compared to what it had been in 2015, but the Liberals nonetheless looked to a more promising future with their 2019 campaign and platform (entitled *Forward: A Real Plan for the Middle Class*). However, an event that had the potential not only to tarnish and dent but perhaps even shatter Trudeau's image — and reverse Liberal gains — then occurred when photographs of Mr Trudeau in blackface made headlines near and far in September 2019.

III. The Scandal in Context

The gravity of Trudeau's usage of black/brownface comes with a clearer understanding of this practice's complex and contested past and present. In the early 19th to mid 20th century American entertainment industry, "white men (and black men, and sometimes women) applied a coal-black makeup made from burnt cork, and behaved in front of an audience as if they were African Americans."⁴⁶ This took place in "working-class circuses, variety houses, and theatres," but its actual origins are unclear.⁴⁷ Beyond depicting stereotypical representations of Black people, many blackface performances also epitomized Confederate states' "nostalgia for slavery and racist violence."⁴⁸ Such minstrelsy and "Dixie" shows were thus "segregationist and derogatory, reinforcing a white status quo of superiority and dehumanizing a clearly delineated population."⁴⁹

The objectives and outcomes of historic blackface acts were not always clear-cut, but comprised both denigrating and more uplifting aspects. For the White working class man, for example, they could be interpreted as "mock[ing] everyone's 'betters'"⁵⁰ and "occasionally played havoc" with the different forms of dominance at play.⁵¹ Concomitantly, such performances could be "racially motivated and demeaning toward freedmen and runaways," portraying "their

46 Stephen Johnson, "Introduction: The Persistence of Blackface and the Minstrel Tradition" in Stephen Johnson, ed, *Burnt Cork: Traditions and Legacies of Blackface Minstrelsy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012) 1 at 2.

47 *Ibid* at 6.

48 Philip SS Howard, "Blackface in Canada" (2017), online: *McGill University* <www.mcgill.ca/aapt/blackface-canada> [perma.cc/MMJ9-64QX] [Howard, "Blackface in Canada"].

49 Johnson, *supra* note 46 at 3.

50 *Ibid* at 7; Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) [Lott, *Love and Theft*].

51 Eric Lott, *Black Mirror: The Cultural Contradictions of American Racism* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2017) at 6 [Lott, *Black Mirror*].

incompetence at anything ostensibly civilized: fashion, dance, song, language, and understanding,” and placing “the audience in a position of superiority” vis-à-vis “the black body” (which could “stand ... in for any immigrant group, for women, for any ‘other’”).⁵² These acts could thus intensify both racial and class conflicts.⁵³ This was typically less about “appropriation or impersonation than [the] theatricalization of race itself.”⁵⁴ As Eric Lott puts it, “[B]lack mirroring seeks less to reproduce blackness with any accuracy than to activate it for [specific] purposes, in the first instance those of social dominance and self-regard.”⁵⁵ In his work, Lott describes how historical blackface minstrelsy prodigiously included white-supremacist predispositions, and credited the minstrel show “with a sudden new capacity to turn vast knots of social turbulence into conflicted stagings of racial subjectivity, and vice versa, to shuttle between racial drama and social trauma.”⁵⁶

Crucially, “[c]ontrary to popular belief, blackface minstrelsy was a popular form of entertainment in Canada, much as it was in the United States.”⁵⁷ American Dixie shows with blackface performers toured across Canada and inspired Canadian versions.⁵⁸ Le Camp documents the extent of these practices in Canada from the 1840s to the 1960s,⁵⁹ and a timeline compiled by Howard provides a systematic accounting up to the contemporary period.⁶⁰ An array of organizations, ranging from charitable and religious groups to schools, police organizations, and the military, sponsored this theatre. Notable figures took part, such as Calixa Lavallée, the composer of *O Canada*, who “spent much of his early career performing in blackface with American minstrel troupes.”⁶¹

Furthermore, blackface is not a painful racist relic from the past and in fact has “never left us.”⁶² The election of the first African American President

52 Johnson, *supra* note 46 at 7.

53 Lott, *Love and Theft*, *supra* note 50.

54 Lott, *Black Mirror*, *supra* note 52 at 7.

55 *Ibid.*

56 Lott, *Love and Theft*, *supra* note 50 at 192.

57 Howard, “Blackface in Canada”, *supra* note 48.

58 Cheryl Thompson, “Locating ‘Dixie’ in “Newspaper Discourse and Theatrical Performance in Toronto, 1880s to 1920s” (2019) 49:2 *Can Rev American Studies* 205.

59 Lorraine Le Camp, *Racial Considerations of Minstrel Shows and Related Images in Canada* (PhD Dissertation, University of Toronto, 2005) [unpublished].

60 Howard, “Blackface in Canada”, *supra* note 48.

61 Adina Bresge, “Blackface has a long history in Canada: here’s a look”, *Global News* (19 September 2019), online: <globalnews.ca/news/5926620/blackface-canada-history/> [perma.cc/5BSU-KHGN]; Brian Christopher Thompson, *Anthems and Minstrel Shows: The Life and Times of Calixa Lavallée, 1842-1891* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015).

62 Johnson, *supra* note 46 at 2.

“occasioned the legitimate return of blackface comedy. All across Barack Obama’s first term the burnt cork snuck back.”⁶³ Meanwhile, in Canada, blackface minstrelsy today emerges through what is considered to be fun and frolic, at Halloween parties, university campus events, comedy fests, and satirical theatre performances.⁶⁴ Here, “[e]ach time a blackface incident occurs, contentious debates ensue, and the incidents are frequently defended as ‘just harmless fun’ ... making humour and entertainment unchallengeable rationales for contemporary blackface.”⁶⁵ The 2009 University of Toronto scandal in which students donned blackface at Halloween to depict the Jamaican bobsled team popularized by the movie *Cool Runnings*,⁶⁶ or the Canadian competitor on RuPaul’s Drag Race who “came under fire ... for appearing in a photo alongside another drag queen wearing blackface,”⁶⁷ and the “multiple portrayals” of former Montreal *Canadiens* hockey player PK Subban by Quebec comedians,⁶⁸ are a few contemporary examples.

Public figures in Canada have also been caught up in the politics of blackface. In December 2013, Joachim Stroink, a Halifax Liberal MLA, tweeted a picture of himself in blackface as he posed as the Dutch character “Zwarte Piet” or “Black Pete,” a figure representing Santa Claus’ helper. Stroink tearfully apologized, admitting his ignorance, but also downplaying what had occurred.⁶⁹ In his 2018 book, *University Commons Divided*, Peter MacKinnon (President Emeritus of the University of Saskatchewan and an Officer of the Order of Canada) wrote that he did not condone incidents of blackface on university campuses. He maintained instead that they were ultimately “narrow interpretations of Halloween costumes,” and that any formal consequences in response would amount to an “overreaction”⁷⁰ and “lack of proportion” because “[n]o country in the world has adapted to multiculturalism more successfully than has Canada,” and because “most Canadians ... would also remind us that the episodes described here were just Halloween parties.”⁷¹ When he became

63 Lott, *Black Mirror*, *supra* note 52 at 1.

64 Philip SS Howard, “On the Back of Blackness: Contemporary Canadian Blackface and the Consumptive Production of Post-racialist, White Canadian Subjects” (2017) 24:1 *Social Identities* 87 [Howard, “On the Back of Blackness”]; Howard, “National Project”, *supra* note 8; Johnson, *supra* note 46 at 2.

65 Howard, “National Project”, *supra* note 8 at 844.

66 Peter MacKinnon, *University Commons Divided: Exploring Debate and Dissent on Campus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018).

67 Bresge, *supra* note 62.

68 Howard, “On the Back of Blackness”, *supra* note 65 at 88.

69 “Joachim Stroink apologies for Zwarte Piet blackface photo”, *CBC News* (2 December 2013), online: <www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/joachim-stroink-apologizes-for-zwarte-piet-blackface-photo-1.2447494> [perma.cc/C4ZQ-T8WB].

70 MacKinnon, *supra* note 66 at 56.

71 *Ibid* at 45.

Dalhousie University's Interim President in 2019, twenty-eight law professors challenged MacKinnon's stance, calling for code of conduct policies on the grounds that:

... reasonable people know or ought to know that wearing blackface would make other people feel demeaned, intimidated or harassed ... [and that] this practice cannot be separated from its painful history ... indelibly marked by racism. Blackface cannot be understood in isolation from historical and ongoing practices invoking the imagery of African enslavement.⁷²

In short, Stroink and MacKinnon's reactions epitomize the "white innocence,"⁷³ and even willful "unknowing,"⁷⁴ that displace Canada's colonialism and racism and invoke Canada's diversity in a defence of White male power. These are patterns that recur in Trudeau's response to the black/brownface scandal in late 2019.

Not long thereafter and in the midst of the federal election campaign, three separate incidents in which Justin Trudeau appeared in black/brownface came to light. On Wednesday, September 18, while the Prime Minister and his campaign team were enroute to the Halifax airport, *Time* magazine journalists "called with [the] alarming news [that,] within hours, the magazine would publish a picture that could doom his bid to win another four years in power."⁷⁵ While still on the runway, the decision was made to delay their tightly timed departure for Winnipeg, so they could "scramble to get ahead of the explosive story."⁷⁶

The first photo featured Trudeau posed between four women, wearing a turban and robe, with dark makeup covering his face and one visible hand resting on the lower neck, above the breastbone, of one of the women pictured. It had appeared in a 2000-2001 high school yearbook when he was a 29-year-old teacher at the West Point Grey Academy private school,⁷⁷ dressed as "Aladdin"

72 Constance MacIntosh & Sheila Wildeman et al (2019), letter on file with author.

73 Sunera Thobani, "White Innocence, Western Supremacy: The Role of Western Feminism in the 'War on Terror'" in Sherene Razack, Malinda Smith & Sunera Thobani, eds, *States of Race: Critical Race Feminism for the 21st Century* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2010) 114 at 141.

74 Manu Vimalassery, Juliana Hu Pegues & Aloysha Goldstein, "Introduction: On Colonial Unknowing" (2016) 19:4 *Theory & Event*.

75 David Ljunggren, "How the Trudeau campaign scrambled to sidestep political disaster from brownface controversy", *SaltWire* (3 October 2019), online: <www.saltwire.com/halifax/news/how-the-trudeau-campaign-scrambled-to-sidestep-political-disaster-from-brownface-controversy-359614/> [perma.cc/NN6C-LBPJ].

76 *Ibid.*

77 "For just over two years he taught French, math, and occasionally drama, creative writing and law." See Wendy Stueck, Karen Howlett & Ian Bailey, "'We all had costumes on': Guests recall Arabian Nights

for an “Arabian Nights” themed gala. *Time.com* had obtained a copy of the yearbook from a businessperson, described as “being part of the West Point Grey Academy Community.”⁷⁸ They were “not at the party,” but had first seen “the photograph in July and felt it should be made public.”⁷⁹ A second photo from the April 2001 *Viewpoint*, the school’s newsletter, then followed, this one showing both of Trudeau’s darkened hands and his arms draped around two men of colour wearing turbans.

On the plane at the Halifax airport, according to Ljunggren’s sources, Liberal handlers “prepared a contrite message” and Trudeau “began calling as many Liberal legislators and cabinet ministers from ethnic minorities as he could, hoping to beat the news on Twitter.”⁸⁰ Then he “called a nationally televised media conference at which he ... apologized repeatedly.”⁸¹ Trudeau subsequently admitted to wearing blackface on another occasion, as a student in his elite Montreal high school’s (Collège Jean-de-Brébeuf) talent show, where he sang “Day O (Banana Boat Song)” by Harry Belafonte, appearing with a dark black face and wearing oversized garments that revealed parts of his chest and stomach. As the week progressed, a third image emerged (from an undisclosed source in the Conservative Party) in a video clip published by *Global News*, featuring Trudeau in blackface from the 1990s. At this point, Trudeau stated that he could not be “definitive” about the exact number of times he had dressed in blackface.⁸²

Trudeau initially stated that he did not appreciate the racism involved, referred to “makeup” in an effort to dilute the blackface reality, and went on to say that “[n]ow we know better.”⁸³ The use of “we,” not “I,” is noteworthy here: to whom does “we” refer, exactly? Trudeau then further downplayed the incident by saying that many people were dressed up and that “[i]t’s not really

gala Trudeau attended in brownface”, *The Globe and Mail* (19 September 2019), online: <www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-we-all-had-costumes-on-guests-recall-arabian-nights-gala-trudeau/> [perma.cc/65QD-F9BC].

78 Tyler Dawson & Vanmala Subramaniam, “I’m really sorry’: Justin Trudeau admits wearing brownface at 2001 costume party”, *The National Post* (18 September 2019), online: <nationalpost.com/news/politics/election-2019/yearbook-photo-surfaces-of-trudeau-wearing-brownface-costume-in-2001/> [perma.cc/QE7E-3N9T].

79 *Ibid.*

80 Ljunggren, *supra* note 76.

81 *Ibid.*

82 Marieke Walsh, Michelle Carbert & Kristy Kirkup, “Trudeau apologizes again for wearing blackface, cannot say how many times he wore racist makeup”, *The Globe and Mail* (19 September 2019), online: <www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-new-blackface-video-surfaces-a-day-after-trudeau-apologizes-for-two/> [perma.cc/GQ52-7CTP].

83 *Ibid* [emphasis added].

something to be mean or to hurt anybody ... [i]t's more of a party,"⁸⁴ echoing the aforementioned public officials' logic. Granted, this was followed by a second more substantive apology, but there were still unanswered questions in Trudeau's "cringe-worthy"⁸⁵ acknowledgement that "his 'layers of privilege' as a wealthy white man meant that he didn't see the racism behind his actions."⁸⁶

In stark contrast, Jagmeet Singh immediately expressed the pain and hurt felt by people of colour who see black/brownface imagery as making a "‘mockery’ of racialized people who, because of the colour of their skin, ‘face challenges and barriers and obstacles in their life’"⁸⁷ and described the "newly revealed images as part of ‘a pattern of behaviour’" that undermined the sincerity of Trudeau's "oft-cited commitment to diversity."⁸⁸ White political leaders then rushed to be on record as defenders of racial diversity and critics of Trudeau's actions. Andrew Scheer, for his part, described his extreme shock and disappointment, adding that "[i]t was just as racist in 2001 as it is in 2019," and remarking further that "what Canadians saw this evening is someone with a complete lack of judgement and integrity and someone who's not fit to govern this country."⁸⁹ Elizabeth May, leader of the Green Party, also commented that she was "deeply shocked by the racism shown in the photograph" and demanded that Trudeau "apologize for the harm done and commit to learning and appreciating the requirement to model social justice leadership at all levels of government."⁹⁰ By contrast, the Bloc Québécois leader, Yves-François Blanchet, and the People's Party leader, Maxime Bernier, did not accuse Trudeau of racism, but did use the opportunity to decry his hypocrisy, with Bernier tweeting that Trudeau was "the biggest hypocrite in the country," and Blanchet suggesting that Trudeau "has all the flaws in the world."⁹¹ As Blanchet continued: "He's certainly not a great prime minister, he may not even qualify for the term competent, but ... [he] is not a racist."⁹²

84 *Ibid.*

85 Elamin Abdelmehmed, "What Trudeau didn't answer, and the questions that went unasked", Opinion, *The Globe and Mail* (19 September 2019), online: <www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-what-justin-trudeau-didnt-answer-and-the-questions-that-went-unasked/> [perma.cc/E9VD-NKCJ].

86 Marieke Walsh, Michelle Zilio & Kristy Kirkup, "It was blackface and that is just not right", *The Globe and Mail* (20 September 2019) A1.

87 Walsh & Carbert, *supra* note 12.

88 "Racist images devastate Liberal brand", Editorial, *Winnipeg Free Press* (20 September 2019) A6.

89 Sean Kilpatrick, "Trudeau's blackface and the 2019 federal election: A guide to the story so far", *The Globe and Mail* (20 September 2019), online: <<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-federal-election-2019-justin-trudeau-blackface-explainer/>> [perma.cc/NP4Z-BEAV].

90 *Ibid.* "In this matter," May said, Trudeau had "failed."

91 *Ibid.*

92 *Ibid.*

IV. Theoretical Framework and Method

The theoretical lens that will now be employed to scrutinize the Trudeau scandal and its aftermath draws on both classic⁹³ and more contemporary critiques⁹⁴ of Canadian multiculturalism that underscore its pragmatic championing, its changeability, and the problematic “white innocence”⁹⁵ it assumes and perpetuates. In particular, the present study spotlights multiculturalism’s performativity, illuminating the ways in which it serves to legitimize White privilege, both narrowly and more broadly, by distancing and/or displacing Canada’s settler colonialism, racism, and multiple, material inequalities.

Multicultural performativity in this context, then, not only encompasses voluntary performance/performative acts, or acting out, but also Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, which describes the “reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names”⁹⁶ in that these discursive forces become normalized into political practices. Moreover, we see here that the distinction between performance, as theatrical, and performativity, as linguistic, is, in practice, quite blurry. This is because, as Gregson and Rose suggest, performance and performativity “are intrinsically connected, through the saturation of performers with power.”⁹⁷

93 Himani Bannerji, *The Dark Side of the Nation: Essays on Multiculturalism, Nationalism and Gender* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press, 2000); Yasmeen Abu-Laban & Christina Gabriel, *Selling Diversity: Immigration, Multiculturalism, Employment Equity and Globalization* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2002); Sherene H Razack, “When Place Becomes Race” in Sherene H Razack, ed, *Race, Space, and the Law: Unmapping a White Settler Society* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2002) 1 at 5.

94 May Chazan et al, eds, *Home and Native Land: Unsettling Multiculturalism in Canada* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2011); Eve Haque, *Multiculturalism Within a Bilingual Framework: Language, Race, and Belonging in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012); Yasmeen Abu-Laban, “Reform by Stealth: The Harper Conservatives and Canadian Multiculturalism” in Jack Jedwab, ed, *The Multiculturalism Question: Debating Identity in 21st-Century Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2014) 149; Elke Winter, “Rethinking Multiculturalism After its ‘Retreat’: Lessons from Canada” (2015) 59:6 *American Behavioural Scientist* 637; Liza Lorenzetti & André Jacob, “White Privilege: Racism, Anti-Racism and Changing Oppressive Social Structures” in David Este, Liza Lorenzetti & Christa Sato, eds, *Racism and Anti-Racism in Canada* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2018) 39 at 39; Lucy El-Sherif & Mark Sinke, “‘One Message, All the Time and in Every Way’: Spatial Subjectivities and Pedagogies of Citizenship” (2018) 48:1 *Curriculum Inquiry* 35; Néstor Media & Becca Whitla, “(An)Other Canada is Possible: Rethinking Canada’s Colonial Legacy” (2019) 5:1 *Horizontes Decoloniales* 13.

95 Thobani, *supra* note 74.

96 Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993) at 2. In another work, Butler explains that “performativity starts to describe a set of processes that produce ontological effect, that is, that work to bring into being certain kinds of realities or ... that lead to certain kinds of socially binding consequences.” See Judith Butler, “Performative Agency” (2010) 3:2 *J Cultural Economy* 147 at 147.

97 Nicky Gregson & Gillian Rose, “Taking Butler Elsewhere: Performativities, Spatialities and Subjectivities” (2000) 18:4 *Environment & Planning D: Society & Space* 433 at 434.

The method employed here involves a sampling of select newspapers' scandal coverage and a content analysis. Due to the fact that a cursory library search of Canadian media sources using the terms "Trudeau and blackface" can easily obtain thousands of results, for the purposes of this article,⁹⁸ the coverage of the scandal in three specifically chosen newspapers was reviewed. The chosen newspapers were *The Globe and Mail* — Canada's leading "national" English language newspaper — and two local newspapers, Halifax's *The Chronicle Herald*, and the *Winnipeg Free Press*. The choice of local papers was intentional because the Trudeau campaign team learned of the release of the black/brownface photos while in Halifax, and in transit to Winnipeg, where his first, formal apologies occurred. The assumption here was that the coverage and public reaction to the scandal in *The Herald* and the *Free Press* would be more extensive given that Trudeau was in Halifax as the news of it broke, and in Winnipeg when he gave his first public-facing apology. All three are mainstream papers that fall in and around the centre-right of the political spectrum, albeit with more explicit right-wing content found in *The Chronicle Herald* given its re-posts from well-known conservative outlets *Postmedia* and *The National Post*.

A focus on "core storylines,"⁹⁹ prevalent discourses (specifically the dominant discourses used around race and multiculturalism), and imagery found in news reports, commentaries, editorials, and letters to the editor was adopted for this analysis. These stories — which appeared from September 18 to October 30, 2019 and were identified through the database *Eureka* using the key words "Trudeau" and "blackface"¹⁰⁰ — are illustrative of the tenor of the coverage and offer a good indication of the dominant expressions of public opinion around the scandal. As will become apparent, the scandal received significant press initially, but attention soon waned. All in all, its treatment was quite superficial, with the potential significance and implications of the black/brownface photos either disregarded or downplayed and deflected.

98 Initially, this study scanned two "national" English language papers, *The Globe and Mail* and *National Post*, and six local, English language papers: the *Vancouver Sun*, *Calgary Herald*, *Winnipeg Free Press*, *Toronto Star*, *Ottawa Citizen*, and Halifax's *The Chronicle Herald*.

99 Wallace, for example, makes use of "core storylines" in her work on media framing. See, for example, Rebecca Wallace, "'Warriors Don't Sleep Till Noon': Colonial Rhetoric and the Framing of Indigenous Recipients of Welfare in Canadian Print News, 1990-2015" (2021) 9:2 *Politics, Groups, & Identities* 300 at 301.

100 Colette Brin & Ryan MacDonald, "News Editors" in Alex Marland & Thierry Giasson, eds, *Inside the Campaign: Managing Elections in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2020) 85 at 93-94.

V. Media Review and Assessment

A review of 42 blackface-related documents published in *The Globe and Mail* in the period under scrutiny reveals patterns of minimization and redirection and emphasizes the use of people of colour to bolster narratives of legitimation. As soon as the story broke, the *Globe* dispatched a reporter and photographer to Trudeau's Papineau constituency to conduct "person on the street" interviews and take photos, predominantly featuring young, racialized individuals. For example, a young man of colour and admittedly a Liberal supporter suggested that: "As a prime minister, Trudeau has demonstrated that he is all about culture and multiculturalism. I feel like it was a stupid mistake in the past. He did acknowledge it and apologize for it. Like every other human he deserves another chance." Other comments included: "I'm not really mad at him because he was a kid and maybe he didn't know much," and this is "a complete waste of time," in that it overshadowed the real issues at hand, like climate change. Conversely, a young woman of colour commented that we should do better in 2019, and criticized Trudeau's weak apology, whereas a young, White woman countered: "We should leave in the past what happened in the past. ... [T]his whole thing was unnecessary."¹⁰¹

September 19 *Globe* reports also contained rebukes concerning Trudeau's use of black/brownface, which was seen as offensive and appallingly lacking in judgment. However, by the next day, the following headline appears: "Liberal candidates stand by Trudeau in the wake of blackface photos." In the article, one candidate was quoted as saying the photos were "an anodyne situation. ... We even laughed about it ... a bit [and] didn't understand why there was such an uproar."¹⁰² Moreover, racialized Liberal candidates were identified as expressing their support for Trudeau, and the focus on Trudeau's riding continued with constituent Carole Brazeau stating: "I think it's a little ridiculous. There are more important issues than some picture from 20 years ago, or some Halloween costume."¹⁰³ Harmeet Dhillon added: "I don't feel any racism, on my side. It was an honest mistake. Hopefully he learned from it and moved on."¹⁰⁴

101 All of the above in: "What voters in Justin Trudeau's riding think about the blackface incidents", *The Globe and Mail* (19 September 2019), online: <www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-what-voters-in-justin-trudeaus-riding-think-about-the-blackface/> [perma.cc/6GYK-AHHY].

102 Laura Stone, Kathryn Blaze Baum & Tu Thanh Ha, "Liberal candidates stand by Trudeau in the wake of blackface photos, video", *The Globe and Mail* (20 September 2019), online: <www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-liberal-candidates-stand-by-trudeau-in-wake-of-blackface-photos-video/> [perma.cc/6ECQ-KZ5W].

103 "The reaction in Papineau", *The Globe and Mail* (20 September 2019) A8.

104 *Ibid.* The article also confirms that the sandal wouldn't affect Mr. Dhillon's vote.

There were repeated questions around whether voters would forgive Trudeau, and what impact the black/brownface revelations would have on Liberals' campaign narratives and electoral prospects. Polls emphasized the tight race and commentaries considered the scandal's impact on target voters, such as young people who are "less likely than older ones to buy that times have changed and Mr. Trudeau didn't know better."¹⁰⁵ As one commentator suggested, the "best-case scenario for the Liberals might [have been] that less engaged voters attribute the blackface uproar to typical political mudslinging."¹⁰⁶

In short, the focus was more on the campaign than on the controversy. Columnist John Ibbitson admonished Trudeau for being silent "[a]ll those years,"¹⁰⁷ but while Konrad Yakabuski wrote that "[v]oters ... expect more from a 29-year-old teacher entrusted with the responsibility of setting an example" and that this would "forever stain Mr. Trudeau's image," he also declared that Canadians would absolve Trudeau given their forgiving nature, in contrast to Americans.¹⁰⁸

Canada's national paper also featured positive encounters where accusations of racism were controverted. Even in more critical reports it was still noted that signs were brandished at a press conference that read "Mr. Trudeau was warmly welcomed" or "Justin Trudeau is not racist."¹⁰⁹ Liberal candidates were depicted falling over themselves in support of Trudeau, as with a report on Judy Sgro's bizarre remark that "[t]hose in the black community have told me how much more love they have for the Prime Minister that he wanted to have a blackface, [and] he took great pride in that," which was followed by an apology.¹¹⁰ In those instances when racism *was* explicitly acknowledged, on the other hand, it would be countered with some variation of the sentiment that this was an ignorant or "naive" *past* mistake.¹¹¹

105 Adam Radwanski, "Blackface furor exacerbates weakness Liberal campaign was already showing", Opinion, *The Globe and Mail* (21 September 2019) A6.

106 *Ibid.*

107 John Ibbitson, "The offence was not just makeup, but also the silence", Opinion, *The Globe and Mail* (19 September 2019), online: <www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-the-greatest-offence-justin-trudeau-made-was-not-the-makeup/> [perma.cc/QA3X-BVRV].

108 Konrad Yakabuski, "This is a permanent stain on Trudeau's image, but will voters forgive him?", Opinion, *The Globe and Mail* (20 September 2019), online: <www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-this-is-a-permanent-stain-on-trudeaus-image-but-will-canadians/> [perma.cc/7M7H-TC5A].

109 Walsh, Carbert & Kirkup, *supra* note 83.

110 Marieke Walsh & Kristy Kirkup, "Liberal candidate Sgro apologizes for blackface remarks", *The Globe and Mail* (10 October 2019) A4.

111 "And now, Trudeau must face the voters", Editorial, *The Globe and Mail* (20 September 2019) A12.

Also noteworthy was *The Globe's* commissioning of John English, esteemed academic and PET chronicler (and former Liberal candidate), to write an article on the scandal. He wrote: "Pierre would have agreed that Justin's actions, like his own youthful excesses, were terribly wrong. Nevertheless, he would have likely told him that ... [h]e should close the past and build the future by unremittingly seeking justice in his own time."¹¹² Indeed, the piece was entitled: "We should judge all prime ministers by their present behaviour, not their past mistakes."¹¹³ Such representations of naïveté and youthful missteps are highly indicative of the "white innocence" motif.

A review of 44 documents published in Halifax's *Chronicle Herald* reveals similar tendencies, with a couple of exceptions. Initial scathing commentary around the black/brownface scandal soon petered out. Early reports honed in on its "possibly lethal" election impact,¹¹⁴ but under the dramatic headline, the "scandal deepens," Greg Fergus, "a black Liberal legislator from Quebec," is featured recounting that Trudeau had called him before the story broke to apologize and is quoted saying that no one "has ever lived their lives without making errors" and that "Canadians should focus on 'all the amazing things we [i.e. Liberals] have done for diversity'."¹¹⁵

The *Herald's* coverage also contained some distinctive discussion of the black/brownface scandal as political ploy. Gail Lethbridge speculated on the political machinations involved around the photos and the video, emphasizing the Conservatives' role in passing the video to *Global News* and then wondering whether the Liberals had leaked the first photo to be a step ahead of the video release.¹¹⁶ Allegations of political dirty tricks aside, Lethbridge's commentary still contained reactions seen elsewhere: while the images were "jarring and hurtful" and she was "not here to defend Justin Trudeau," but also that this was "the prime minister who — more than any other — has championed the causes of inclusion and diversity."¹¹⁷

112 John English, "We should judge all prime ministers by their present behaviour, not their past mistakes", *The Globe and Mail* (23 September 2019), online: <www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-we-should-judge-all-prime-ministers-by-their-present-behaviour-not/> [perma.cc/H9G4-SYSQ].

113 *Ibid.*

114 Jim Vibert, "Election hangs on forgiveness", *The Chronicle Herald* (20 September 2019) A1.

115 John Morris, "Brownface scandal deepens; Other damaging images of Trudeau emerge", *Reuters*, posted by *The Chronicle Herald* (20 September 2019) A10.

116 Gail Lethbridge, "Blackface scandal raises many questions", *The Chronicle Herald* (21 September 2019) D1.

117 *Ibid.*

Harsher critiques appear in *The Herald's Postmedia News* re-posts,¹¹⁸ such as the reprint of Christie Blatchford's *National Post* commentary excoriating the Liberals' excuse that "[w]e were all young once and sometimes made poor choices and mistakes,"¹¹⁹ or Joseph Brean's piece pointing to the irony around an early Liberal campaign theme accusing Conservative Party officials of White supremacy as Liberal candidates now contorted "themselves into moral pretzels, trying to find a way to praise their leader for such blatant racism."¹²⁰ The irony is that, as with the decrivals of Trudeau from party leaders like Scheer, these commentaries involve White, conservative columnists opportunely adopting anti-racist analyses.

Still, *The Herald* also downplayed the scandal, mostly portraying it as a distraction from more significant matters. Letters to the editor indicated that the media were "wasting paper, ink & airtime on Justin Trudeau's past peccadilloes, instead of concentrating on the really serious issues, such as his broken election promises, his treatment of Jody Wilson-Raybould and the whole SNC Lavalin affair."¹²¹ While some letters noted that the scandal exposed the "dirty little secret of life in Canada ... that racism infects almost all of us in ways conscious and unconscious,"¹²² this sentiment was not as prevalent as the excuses. For example, other letters expressed sentiments like, "[w]e all make mistakes ... [s]ociety changes, and hopefully we grow and change our attitudes,"¹²³ and that "[i]t is clear that Trudeau has matured and he's not racist. ... The world has changed and Trudeau has changed. Justin Trudeau has apologized. Let's move forward!"¹²⁴ The scandal soon became old news and *The Herald's* coverage can be summed up with the headline, "Bigger narra-

118 For example, see Andy Riga, "Election notebook: Parties hit a sour note with a dismal D-minus on democracy", *SaltWire* (18 October 2019), online: <www.saltwire.com/halifax/federal-election/election-notebook-parties-hit-a-sour-note-with-a-dismal-d-minus-on-democracy-365662/> [perma.cc/5SZS-WS2C].

119 Christie Blatchford, "Liberal MP Judy Sgro, like Trudeau, is incapable of shame", *Postmedia News*, posted by *SaltWire* (9 October 2019), online: <www.saltwire.com/nova-scotia/opinion/christie-blatchford-liberal-mp-judy-sgro-like-trudeau-is-incapable-of-shame-362283/> [perma.cc/4SHE-EV93].

120 Joseph Brean, "How the 2019 federal election became a vote for nothing", *Postmedia News*, posted by *SaltWire* (21 October 2019), online: <www.saltwire.com/halifax/news/how-the-2019-federal-election-became-a-vote-for-nothing-366124/> [perma.cc/3M52-M59U].

121 Letter from Mary Holt, "Media circus" in "Voice of the people — your election letters", *The Chronicle Herald* (23 September 2019) A6.

122 Letter from Skip Hambling, "Uncomfortable Truth" in "Voice of the people: your election letters", *The Chronicle Herald* (23 September 2019) A6.

123 Letter from Sheila Sperry, "Stop Mudslinging" in "Voice of the people: your election letters", *The Chronicle Herald* (23 September 2019) A6.

124 Letter from Violet Rosengarten, "Time to Move On" in "Voice of the people: your election letters", *The Chronicle Herald* (23 September 2019) A6.

tives play out in Halifax.”¹²⁵ In a post election reflection, Trudeau’s victory is described as “remarkable” given the scandal, but it is the SNC-Lavalin scandal that is referenced, not the black/brownface one.¹²⁶

In a review of 24 black/brownface related pieces published in the *Winnipeg Free Press*, we see several reports on Trudeau’s first post-scandal opportunity “to test his apology” in front of “actual Canadians.”¹²⁷ He is described as being “neither booed nor heckled by the 300 to 400 Winnipeggers who gathered around,” and it is noted that “[o]ccasionally there was polite applause when he apologized, repeatedly,” with the main message being that Trudeau was both “contrite” and cagey about further instances of black/brownface.¹²⁸ Trudeau’s “fuzzy” reply to the question of “when he realized his actions were hurtful and wrong”¹²⁹ is remarked upon, as he responded that his awareness came with his election as MP for Papineau — “an extraordinarily multicultural community where any crowd looks a lot like this crowd here in Winnipeg” — and that it then became “very, very clear to [him] that minimizing or further marginalizing by dressing up that way is absolutely unacceptable.”¹³⁰ Trudeau went on to claim that he had not disclosed these incidents when he sought the Liberal leadership because “[q]uite frankly, I was embarrassed.”¹³¹ He then concluded, before being “whisked away in a black stretch limo,” that “I think we all need to recognize that even in an incredible country like Canada, there’s still a lot more work to do. People are still facing discrimination, marginalization every single day.”¹³²

In another front page report on this gathering, Trudeau admitted that “as a child of a privileged family, he clearly had not stopped to think about the people who had been hurt by the images of him in offensive makeup,” that he regretted what he had done, and that he asked forgiveness.¹³³ Trudeau’s evasiveness was observed, as was the impact of the scandal on the Liberal Party’s

125 John DeMont, “Bigger narratives play out in Halifax”, *The Chronicle Herald* (3 October 2019) A1.

126 David Ljunggren, “Raising voter fears helped Trudeau to victory in Canada: sources”, *SaltWire* (23 October 2019), online: <www.saltwire.com/halifax/news/raising-voter-fears-helped-trudeau-to-victory-in-canada-sources-366940/> [perma.cc/EH44-NQW9].

127 Dan Lett, “Trudeau kicks-off his national tour of regret”, Editorial, *Winnipeg Free Press* (20 September 2019) 1.

128 Larry Kusch, “A contrite, yet evasive, Trudeau faces up to his past”, *Winnipeg Free Press* (20 September 2019) 1.

129 *Ibid.*

130 *Ibid.*

131 *Ibid.*

132 *Ibid.*

133 Lett, *supra* note 128 at 1.

chances, but the article concluded that it was still unlikely that “many core Liberal voters”¹³⁴ would support another party.

A few pages into this September 20 issue, we find another “person on the street” article, but unlike *The Globe’s* reporting from Papineau, here people in the Winnipeg North and Winnipeg Centre ridings were less sympathetic. 29-year-old Gurcharanjit Kaur, for example, stated that “[c]olouring yourself brown is not right,” with the reporter explaining that Kaur “needs to seriously consider the perception she has always held of the ‘people’s person’ leader who cares for refugees and students,” and then adding 20-year-old voter Moe’s voice, “an Iraqi-Canadian” who commented that the photos “cross[ed] a line” and changed his mind about Trudeau.¹³⁵ While the subtitle of this article was foreboding (“Racist incidents may cost Liberals support in diverse ridings”), the headline, “Trudeau forgiven, not forgotten,” is more ambivalent, centering the main point that Trudeau would ultimately win this fight.¹³⁶

Like *The Herald’s* early commentary, the *Free Press* also contained censure. A condemnatory editorial entitled “Racist images devastate Liberal brand” raised pivotal questions and observed “even if he’s fully sincere in his assertion that he is not racist, he would have a very hard time disputing ... a life spent mostly careening blissfully through exclusive climes in a bubble of oblivious White privilege.”¹³⁷ This reproach then pivoted to “the whole of the Liberal party machinery [that] chose to keep these shameful aspects of this past concealed from public view,”¹³⁸ before incongruously concluding with a plug for a re-elected Liberal government based “on the merits of past performance.”¹³⁹

On September 21 the scathing headlines persisted, and headlines such as “Racist photos expose Trudeau as a charlatan”¹⁴⁰ persisted too, although much print was devoted to how Manitoba Liberal candidates reacted to Trudeau’s revelations by insisting that Trudeau was not a racist. Letters to the editor, meanwhile, criticized the blackface focus, suggesting that the paper was behaving like a tabloid and commenting that “[m]y friends and I are tired of this. Yes, Trudeau is a privileged white boy ... [but] come on — move on.” Other

134 *Ibid.*

135 Maggie Macintosh, “Trudeau forgiven, not forgotten: voters”, *Winnipeg Free Press* (19 September 2019) 3.

136 *Ibid.*

137 “Racist images devastate Liberal brand”, Editorial, *Winnipeg Free Press* (20 September 2019) A6.

138 *Ibid.*

139 *Ibid.*

140 Doug Firby, “Racist photos expose Trudeau as a charlatan”, *Winnipeg Free Press* (21 September 2019) A9.

letters echoed these sentiments, emphasizing that “Trudeau has confessed and apologized” and suggesting that “present and future actions moving forward are the most important things to consider, rather than looking for skeletons in people’s closets.”¹⁴¹

As the campaign intensified, there were conjectures around Trudeau’s electability post-blackface,¹⁴² and around whether the scandal would have an impact on one demographic in particular: young Canadians.¹⁴³ After the election, critiques were still in evidence, but so too were expressions of acceptance and continued support for Trudeau, as with Manitoba Métis Federation president David Chartrand, who asserted that “he was not trying to hurt somebody intentionally. He was just being overzealous in his attempt to portray an image.”¹⁴⁴

VI. Deepening the Analysis and Drawing Conclusions: It’s All About the Race, Not the Racism

Across all three papers, the black/brownface photos were portrayed as a deep, self-inflicted wound that could jeopardize Justin Trudeau’s personal brand and the Liberal Party’s well-being, but whether it would prove lethal was in doubt. Here, in answer to the first query posed by this study, the foregoing reveals that the Trudeau brand was decidedly damaged but not irrevocably so, and, in the end, it was all about the (election) race, and not the racism. Trudeau’s “*ethos*,” “*pathos*,” and “*logos*”¹⁴⁵ depended on framing and marketing but also credibility, and the latter appeared under most scrutiny in the *Winnipeg Free Press*, and least in *The Globe*, with *The Herald* falling somewhere in between. However, while the *Free Press* featured more blatant critiques than *The Globe* or *The Herald*, in all three papers we see deflection, with the scandal soon fading in print as well as from memory.

While media coverage was extensive, initially at least, it was often opportunistic and cursory, minimizing the racism in multiple ways. In the main, the scandal was considered in relation to its impact on the election and what would happen next for the Liberal Party’s leadership and electoral fortunes. For the most part, the black/brownface affair appeared as a minor infraction,

141 “Letters, Sept 25”, *Winnipeg Free Press* (25 September 2019) 6.

142 Allan Levine, “‘Electability’ is elusive, but necessary”, *Winnipeg Free Press* (1 October 2019) A7.

143 Dylan Robertson, “Politicians don’t understand us”, *Winnipeg Free Press* (7 October 2019) 2.

144 Niigaan Sinclair, “Canada behind latest twist in Kapyong saga”, *Winnipeg Free Press* (26 October 2019) 4.

145 Lalancette & Raynauld, *supra* note 5 at 891.

frequently framed as a past misdeed which did not merit thorough enquiry. Clearly, there were also some flashes of poignant and perceptive critique, especially in op-eds and letters, where the point was made that the black/brownface revelations reflected a racist reality that a Canadian majority continued willingly to disregard. This, however, tended to be the minority view, and what was instead trumpeted, time and time again, was Canada's presumptive multicultural credentials.

This deflection and downplaying of racism ultimately illustrates how prominent politicians, including Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, as well as the mainstream media (via both national and local newspapers, their contributors and readers), perpetuate the mythology of Canada as tolerant, egalitarian, and the champion of multiculturalism and diversity. When pictures of Canada's "feminist" and "woke" PM in black/brownface go viral, and nothing really comes of it, this offers a telling case in point that illustrates how self-reproducing beliefs serve to reinforce a denial of racial egalitarianism.

And so, in answer to this article's queries around how the Trudeau brand is caught up in broader portrayals of Canada's multiculturalism and around what the media and public reaction to these incidences of black/brownface tell us about this country's reputed egalitarianism and cultural benevolence, some revelatory responses may be offered.

One may observe more than just Trudeau's personal incongruities when it comes to representations of equality and diversity, with his initial downplaying of the blackface scandal morphing from the "white settler innocence"¹⁴⁶ that is typical of section 27's early and more celebratory resonances to more of a willful "unknowing."¹⁴⁷ Powerful White-settler dominance,¹⁴⁸ amongst other forms of privilege (gender, sexuality, class, and so on), are exercised as Trudeau first minimizes these incidences of black/brownface as mere fun and frolic, and then abdicates his responsibility, by, for example, failing to recall how many times he actually appeared in black/brownface. More robust apologies follow, but with perfunctory acknowledgments of his multiple privileges, propping up multicultural performativity, as Trudeau and his party are pardoned, not penalized, through re-election.

The power and reach of this performative multiculturalism are reflected in the preponderance of absolutions of Trudeau, disclaimers around racism,

146 Thobani, *supra* note 74; Razack, *supra* note 94.

147 Vimalassery, Hu Pegues & Goldstein, *supra* note 74.

148 Haque, *supra* note 95 at 22.

and references to Canada's vaunted diversity, found in the *Globe*, the *Herald*, and the *Free Press*. Furthermore, the repeated foregrounding of people of colour is striking: recall the ways in which their voices and photos are portrayed in all three papers, distressingly echoing Tolley's research into how racialized individuals are selectively "framed" by the media in election campaigns,¹⁴⁹ or Wallace's exposure of newspapers' use of Indigenous sources to express anti-colonial claims.¹⁵⁰ Here, racialized constituents and racialized politicians are featured validating Trudeau's apologies, reinforcing a performative multiculturalism that idealizes a tolerant Canadian nation with its unique modalities of inclusion. In this regard, the studied responses to the black/brownface scandal, with their pervasive distancing from racism through the perpetual references to Canada's diversity, ultimately promote narratives of denial. In the final analysis, then, such erasures of racism illustrate dramatic present-day disjunctures from the claims of the *Charter's* section 27. Indeed, multiculturalism, the oft-cited symbol of Canada's national identity and inclusivity, is shown here to be an exercise in performativity, privilege, and power.

Intersecting oppressions, among them racism, sexism, classism, as well as the ongoing impact of colonialism, Islamophobia, xenophobia, populism and nativism, are Canadian realities. In and around the time of Canada's last two federal elections, nine Black, Indigenous, or racialized people died in interactions with police (Regis Korchinski-Pacet, Ejaz Ahmed Choudry, Chantel Moore, Rodney Levi, Stewart Kevin Andrews, Jason Collins, Eisha Hudson, Caleb Tubila Njoko, and D'Andre Campbell) and hundreds of intentionally unmarked Indigenous children's graves were detected on the sites of former residential schools. In the summer of 2021, a Windsor, Ontario truck attack targeted a Muslim family and killed four. In the October 2021 election, the right-wing populist, anti-immigrant, anti-multicultural People's Party of Canada garnered nearly five per cent of the vote. All this took place, and yet, for Justin Trudeau and the Liberal team, racial inequality and reconciliation were not at all at the forefront of their 2021 election campaign strategies. In 2021, as with 2019, the "long-overdue national conversation about racism" was evaded at election time.¹⁵¹

Rather than constituting a mere individual, incidental, or idiosyncratic occurrence, then, the black/brownface scandal encapsulates contemporary, paradoxical, contradictory, and ultimately exclusionary evocations of multi-

149 Erin Tolley, *Framed: Media and the Coverage of Race in Canadian Politics* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016).

150 Wallace, *supra* note 100.

151 Dornan, *supra* note 9 at 11.

culturalism, thereby underscoring both section 27's problematic and strategic resonance and its highly selective scope and reach.

In the end, Trudeau apologized and left the black/brownface scandal behind to attend to many other pressing matters. However, as it seems with many other apologies in Canada, we see the apologetic performance, but no national reckoning. Indeed, journalist and academic Niigaan Sinclair wrote in the *Free Press*: "Trudeau wasn't alone in his blackface and 'brownface' costumes — he was a mirror of the nation he would soon lead."¹⁵² As Sinclair continued, the black/brownface scandal accordingly provides an opportunity for reckoning with "this country's long history of privilege and harms, and [with] how many benefit from this violence."¹⁵³ "This," he says, "is how a society looks in the mirror, realizes the costume it's wearing is wrong and takes off the face paint."¹⁵⁴

152 Sinclair, *supra* note 145 at A3.

153 *Ibid.*

154 *Ibid.*