Representation, White Resentment, and the Freedom-of-Expression Defense

Bruno Cornellier

Since the murderous attack against the controversial French satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo* on January 7, 2015, mass expressions of solidarity with the victims of the massacre have clashed with continued expressions of dissent against what many on the margins continue to perceive as the growing Islamophobic obsessions—or what former *Charlie* contributor Olivier Cyran called "Islamophobic neurosis"[1]—cultivated by the journal in recent years. The direct effect of this clash is that it made all too visible the unequal distribution of the privileges that come with freedom of expression as a core tenet of Western liberalism and French republicanism and as the nonnegotiable political value presumed to have been put under threat by these attacks.

As Didier Fassin explained after the January 11 mass demonstrations that brought approximately four million people into the streets of various French cities under the slogan/hashtag *Je suis Charlie*:

> the supposed national unity confronted its most disturbing challenge when it emerged that many students in schools in disadvantaged neighborhoods had refused to observe the moment of silence for the victims of the *Charlie Hebdo* attack and, in the ensuing discussions with their teachers, had contested the cartoonists' right to mock the Prophet or simply wondered why certain deaths deserved collective mourning while others did not.... Punishment of the young

Bruno Cornellier is Assistant Professor of cultural studies in the Department of English at the University of Winnipeg. He is the author of *La "chose indienne": Cinéma et politiques de la représentation autochtone au Québec et au Canada* (2015). His articles and book chapters on race, indigeneity, and settler cultural production have appeared (or are forthcoming) in several scholarly publications, including *Settler Colonial Studies*, *Discourse*, *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, *London Journal of Canadian Studies*, and *Nouvelles vues*.

[1] Olivier Cyran, "'Charlie Hebdo,' pas raciste? Si vous le dites...," *Article11*, December 5, 2013, http://www.article11.info/?Charlie-Hebdo-pas-raciste-Si-vous (accessed January 25, 2015).

> dissidents was extremely harsh, including expulsions from schools, court summonses, and arrests—most notably that of an eight-year-old boy. Elsewhere, several frenzied and in some cases intoxicated or even psychologically disturbed men publicly rejoiced at the deaths of the cartoonists: they were immediately put on trial and sentenced to up to eighteen months of prison for justification of terrorism.[2]

This, quite clearly, is the real test facing the principle of freedom of expression. It is undeniable at this particular historical juncture that the political space from which we are all assumed to be free to speak is never neutral. In this particular case, the endurance of structural inequalities is all too evident in the general distribution of power and privilege between the contemporary beneficiaries of French imperialism and the immigrant diasporas from France's former colonies—and these inequalities remain despite the fact that many French Arabs and nonwhite subjects have indeed accessed the French middle and upper classes. For instance, nonwhite immigrants and their descendants suffer from dramatically higher levels of unemployment and incarceration; they face discrimination both in hiring practices and in terms of differential treatments in the criminal justice system; and they are overrepresented in crowded and underfunded public schools.[3] Hence, the question remains: how can socioeconomically marginalized and/or politically stigmatized subjects freely express their dissent and live without fear of retribution when they are consistently represented in the public sphere as threats to the very principle of secular freedom idealized—or almost theologized—by the white, *laï*c, normative subject of rights and citizenship, and with four million plus people walking behind them and chanting in solidarity? As Teju Cole polemically asked in the aftermath of the attacks, whose *liberté* must be violated and whose body must be killed for the cartoonist to consider his pen broken? Which bodies remain unmournable when it comes to defending "our" freedom?[4]

At the core of *Charlie Hebdo*'s tense relationship with French Arabs is the weekly newspaper's unfettered support for the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, which published in 2005 controversial caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad. These caricatures led to violent protests in many parts of the Muslim world. *Charlie* not only reproduced the caricatures in the name of free speech but also proceeded, for years to come, to publish their own cartoons mocking the Prophet and his followers. The ensuing clashes have been instrumental to much debate about the intersections between secularism and free speech in Western, multicultural democracies and have served as fodder for social forces defending the ban on religious expressions (particularly Muslim, Jewish, and Sikh religious expressions) in the public sphere.

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[2] Didier Fassin, "A French Requiem," *Dissent*, February 7, 2015, http://www.dissentmagazine.org/blog/french-requiem-after-charlie-hebdo (accessed February 8, 2015). Perhaps the most publicly visible and discussed instance of the French state's prosecution of dissenting voices via the legal terminology of "justification of terrorism" is the two-month suspended prison sentence given to the highly controversial stand-up comedian Dieudonné over a Facebook post in which he claimed, after the January 11 mass demonstration in Paris, that he felt like Charlie Coulibaly (a reference to Amedy Coulibaly, who killed a police officer and four Jewish civilians in a kosher grocery store on January 9, 2015).

[3] Mayanthi L. Fernando, *The Republic Unsettled: Muslim French and the Contradictions of Secularism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 13–14.

[4] Teju Cole, "Unmournable Bodies," *New Yorker*, January 9, 2015, http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/unmournable-bodies (accessed January 15, 2015).

In response to varied state attempts to either police or ban visible religious symbols from the public sphere, each time in the name of state secularism, religious neutrality, and women's rights, political theorist Wendy Brown reminds us that "Western secularism, including its historically French variant, *laïcité*," is blinded by its own conceit.[5] Western secularism, she insists, is not religiously neutral. It is a Christian secularism predicated, for instance, on a Protestant opposition between public and private (to name but one example). In the specific case of the French secular Republic, Mayanthi Fernando explains that the notion of national unity that is used to support the ban on religious signs from public life is in itself a historical fantasy that cannot be sustained by any empirical, historical evidence. Contrary to a certain paranoia that wrongly perceives Muslim religious accommodations as a threat to the universal unity of the republican ideal, Fernando contends that these Muslim demands for accommodation represent exactly what the principle of *laïcité* already accomplishes on a daily basis in contemporary France for various religious (often Christian) subjects and institutions: it provides a series of heterogeneous arrangements to its variegated citizenry according to case-by-case administrative jurisprudence.[6] Here lies the contradiction in discourses deploying an allegedly neutral, republican notion of *laïcité*: "Muslim claims to equal citizenship within the legal and political parameters of *laïcité* paradoxically become the basis for questioning Muslims' fitness as citizens."[7]

By revealing the preferential treatment offered to Christian epistemologies and subjectivities within secular regimes, Brown and Fernando thwart the tired argument according to which *Charlie Hebdo* cannot be critiqued on grounds related to racism since its roster of old-school leftist-secularists equally targeted Catholic religious institutions and symbols in their publication. In a republican regime where secularism is epistemologically grounded in a Christian ethos and stacked against non-Christian (and particularly Muslim and Jewish) lives and practices, anti-Vatican and anti-Muslim satires can hardly be comprehended as equivalent in their intent and their effect on the subjects that are thus targeted by the secular cartoonist's free speech.

As scholar Saba Mahmood recently explained, what many self-declared liberal and progressive commentators failed to understand, even those critical of anti-Muslim racism, is "the sense of injury expressed by many Muslims" when confronted by the caricatures of the Prophet.[8] This lack of understanding, she explains, is revealing of the illusions of neutrality that secularism is meant to convey and protect. She explains that Saussurean linguistics' assumption that signifiers are only arbitrarily linked to what or whom they are meant to signify is not a universally and rationally self-evident proposition but belongs instead to the specifically Protestant ethic and epistemology also discussed by Brown. Within such a Protestant epistemological framework, it is assumed that in the absence of any agency, the *image* of the Prophet is evidently disconnected from the actual Prophet and thus can cause no harm, unless one reads such an image improperly, irrationally, religiously.

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5 Wendy Brown, "Civilizational Delusion: Secularism, Tolerance, Equality," in *Revealing Democracy: Secularism and Religion in Liberal Democratic States*, ed. Chantal Maillé, Greg M. Nielsen, and Daniel Salée (Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2013), 36–37.

6 Fernando, *Republic Unsettled*, 9–11.

7 Ibid., 11.

8 Saba Mahmood, "Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?," in *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, ed. Talal Asad et al. (Berkeley: Townsend Center for the Humanities, University of California, 2009), 68.

Against such misconceptions, Mahmood explains that the prohibition to represent the Prophet is not rooted in religious dogma or fanaticism. This prohibition stems from "affective and embodied practices through which a subject comes to relate to a particular sign—a relation founded not only on representation but also on . . . [an] attachment and cohabitation."[9] To love the Prophet, to some extent, means that one tries to *be* the Prophet. Hence, these "mimetic ways of realizing the Prophet's behavior are lived not as commandments but as virtues where one wants to ingest, as it were, the Prophet's persona into oneself."[10] Within such devotional practices, the Prophet is not an absented historical subject that can be represented with referential signs that can stand for him in his absence. It is therefore not a religious law that is transgressed by the caricature; it is rather a "structure of affect, a habitus, that feels wounded."[11]

This explains, insists Mahmood, why even though numerous Muslims fervently defended the rights to free speech of the Danish cartoonists and condemned some of the violent protests against these cartoons, they simultaneously resented the incapacity of their Christian-secular peers to even attempt to understand their experience of hurt when seeing these mocking caricatures. It is precisely these types of injuries that the reactionary and defensive recourse to the freedom-of-expression defense in the face of any critique of representation in multiracial and multicultural contexts seems unable to register, or even to consider as a legitimate form of moral and affective injury that also deserves—and needs—to be grieved.

Contemporary iterations of blackface minstrelsy in popular culture are yet another example of such representational gestures that are often affectively felt, albeit on a very different historical register, like a knife in the flesh by many black subjects, and regardless of the "good," nonracist intentions almost always defensively expressed by those claiming their right to wear the hurtful garb/makeup. Most recently, in Montreal, famous theater and pop-culture icon Denise Filiatrault created a controversy when she presented a white actor in blackface to play the part of local professional hockey superstar P. K. Subban in her year-end review at Théâtre du rideau vert. In her response to an open letter by the organization Diversité artistique Montréal condemning her use of blackface,[12] Filiatrault explained that the theater company simply didn't have the budget to hire a black actor for a short appearance in one comedic skit.[13] Furthermore, she claimed that those criticizing her decision to use blackface failed to remember that she had always been a champion of diversity, notably for helping launch the career of black comedian Normand Braithwaite in Quebec. As a result, she expressed how deeply hurt she felt by those people of color who dared to publicly question her nonracist allegiances, despite her unapologetic use of blackface.

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9 Ibid., 70.

10 Ibid., 75.

11 Ibid., 78.

12 Diversité artistique Montréal, "Lettre ouverte; Blackface: Il est temps d'en finir," January 13, 2015, http://www.diversiteartistique.org/public/files/misc/lettre-ouverte-blackface-13-janvier-2015.pdf (accessed February 15, 2015).

13 Hugo Pilon-Larose, "*Blackface* au Rideau vert: Filiatrault 'humiliée et outrée,'" *La Presse*, January 14, 2015, http://www.lapresse.ca/arts/spectacles-et-theatre/theatre/201501/14/01-4834928-blackface-au-rideau-vert-filiatrault-humiliee-et-outree.php (accessed January 15, 2015).

Many black commentators and activists in Quebec, including Rachel Zellars, Octavia Pierre, and Marilou Craft,[14] responded vehemently to Filiatrault's paternalistic outrage, self-victimization, and postracial white defensiveness in presenting herself as *the* real bearer of personal injuries perpetrated against her by the restlessness of black activists. These activists, needless to say, were also practicing their right to articulate freely and critically their affective experience of historical injury in the face of such cavalier and unapologetic use of blackface.

Beyond the kind of dismissive violence perpetrated by Filiatrault's resentful expression of white entitlement and moral irreproachability, it is famed *La Presse* cartoonist Serge Chapleau's editorial intervention in this controversy that I would like to critically unpack here. Chapleau's January 15, 2015, caricature is a self-portrait in which he appears wearing blackface while holding a placard covered with a doodle of the Prophet Muhammad, under the heading: "After two weeks of convalescence, the cartoonist returns and covers two topics at once."[15] In the midst of the unprecedented expressions of solidarity by cartoonists worldwide in their pictorial defense of the principle of freedom of expression in the wake of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, Chapleau defiantly links the outrage expressed by black Montrealers against Filiatrault's use of blackface to the violence perpetrated against *Charlie* in response to their mocking representations of the Prophet. With such an amalgamation, Chapleau perfectly captures (and proudly relays) the hegemonic structure of feeling of the moment, one in which any critique by people of color of the ways in which they are represented by the privileged beneficiaries of white supremacy is immediately conflated with censorship and thus with an affront against a nonnegotiable and totalizing principle of freedom of expression. Against the censoring forces of "political correctness," the caricaturist stands strong, proud, irreverent, and unapologetic. Against the anger of black Montrealers, Chapleau thus exercises and asserts his freedom of expression by sporting blackface himself, similar to how Western media outlets were expected, as a gesture of solidarity and in the name of freedom of expression, to republish *Charlie Hebdo*'s controversial caricatures. One must pause and wonder about the actual experience of vulnerability that animates Chapleau's self-victimizing gestures. What is it about the pain, injury, or anger of people of color that seems so inadmissible that it must either be silenced or, in this case, be reassaulted with a vengeance as a condition for freedom of expression to thrive?

Of course, we know that people of color have never been silent, passive spectators concerning the way they have been represented by the white cultural (and colonial) mainstream—from blackface minstrelsy to Indian play to the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons. These representations and performances are nevertheless predicated on the flawed assumption that people of color were or could be silenced, that the represented "other" may not speak back. Or more accurately, those representations and performances can be correlated with the ease afforded to members of the dominant group not to hear or not to listen to these voices. Once confronted with the impossibility

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14 Rachel Zellars, "Troubling Question of Blackface in Quebec," *Toronto Star*, February 16, 2015, http://www.thestar.com/opinion/commentary/2015/02/16/troubling-question-of-blackface-in-quebec.html (accessed February 16, 2015); Octavia Pierre, "Speak White en français," *L'égalité est un concept radical* (blog), February 2015, http://unconceptradical.tumblr.com/post/110670768193/speak-white-en-francais (accessed February 21, 2015); and T'cha Dunlevy, "Blackface in Quebec: Intent vs. Offence," *Montreal Gazette*, February 21, 2015, http://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/blackface-in-quebec-intent-vs-offence (accessed February 21, 2015).

15 Chapleau's caricature is available on the web platform of *La Presse*: http://www.lapresse.ca/photos/caricatures/201501/10/12-13361-caricatures-du-11-au-17-janvier-2015.php#957105-15-janvier-2015.

of not hearing, once the roar and the outrage from people of color get so loud that cultural deafness can no longer be feigned, defensive mechanisms are triggered—for instance, in expressions of white resentment, deflective discourses of postraciality and color blindness, accusations of reverse racism or *communautarisme*, and of course the duty to defend "our" freedom of expression against the threat of political correctness.

Here, the freedom-of-expression defense—and its adjoining and reactionary condemnations of political correctness—become entangled with political economy: those who own and control the means to speak defend their right to speak the loudest. In the cases I am discussing here, this defense also corresponds to a deliberate effort to resume a state of not listening or, more accurately, to speak without interruptions (what many now refer to using the neologism *whitesplaining*) so that "we" can simply (and always unsuccessfully) drown in white noise whatever and whoever threatens the hegemonic—that is, the naturalized way of being, feeling, and belonging as subjects assuming their location at the center of political existence. As such, in our allegedly postracial present, the freedom-of-expression defense tends to cling to the majority and to the maintenance of a racial and cultural status quo. What indeed does it mean to actually share this freedom, as people of color or as nonnormative subjects, if what you have the freedom to say can only be heard but rarely listened to by the "true" bearer and defender of universal rights? If what you have to say is so easily struck down, deflected away, *whitesplained* back to you? If your expression of dissent can so abruptly make you an exception open to legal violence and physical coercion each time your speech is perceived as a threat to the hegemonic, as a threat to the only world in which a famous, white, male, cisgender cartoonist, working for a mainstream news media outlet, can imagine himself to be the victim of those who dare practice their equal right to express criticism toward the violence relayed and perpetuated against them by the cartoonist's free speech?

As my colleague Jenny Heijun Wills recently reminded me, there is a substantial difference between being offended and being hurt by representation, and the subjective distancing that mere offense implies is a privilege and a luxury not afforded to those who are directly kicked in the stomach by appropriative and conquering representational gestures.[16] It is as if the pain that results from the exercise of the dominant group's freedom of expression necessitates that this pain remain unrecognizable, unintelligible, and ungrievable. At the core of such expressions of white resentment is the unacknowledged (and unacknowledgeable) notion that grieving this pain or condemning the representation that hurts would become obstructions to "our" freedom to behave regardless. Hence, as Chapleau and many of his colleagues reminded us, "our" freedom, now and then, seems to be predicated on "our" right, but also "our" duty, to inflict on others a hurt that cannot be grieved. For recognizing this grief would require that we take a step back, that we momentarily shut up, and that we listen instead. But for Chapleau and his entitled, self-victimized peers, this is where the affront lies: if such listening requires a momentary, reflective silence on my part, then the critique by people of color becomes censorship. Hence, my freedom of expression requires that *you*, the represented "other," remain silent so that I can speak through you, so that I can express and manifest "our" collective right to free speech on your behalf. The price of free speech, then, is your silence and the ungrievability of your pain.

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16 Jenny Heijun Wills and David-Palumbo-Liu, "'Big in Japan,' the Winnipeg Art Gallery, and the Burden of Education," paper presented at "Masquerade, Masking and Multiculturalism in Canada: An International Symposium," University of Winnipeg, Winnipeg, MB, June 2–4, 2014.

Does that mean that we should abandon the notion of freedom of expression? Of course not! But what we need to do, to paraphrase Jacques Rancière, is to constantly disidentify with the hegemonic self in whose name violence is perpetrated as a means to protect "our" freedom, "our" rights, "our" values.[17] Thus, it is increasingly important to be able to continue polemically claiming, at the same time as we grieve the lives of those tragically murdered in Paris, that "je ne suis pas Charlie," for here lies the true test of what freedom of expression really means. A

[17] For a summary (in English) of this argument, see Jacques Rancière, "Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization," in *The Identity in Question*, ed. John Rajchman (New York: Routledge, 1995), 63–72.