Any exploration of contemporary blackface in Canada leads to the striking observation that educational spaces – or more accurately, those spaces associated with hegemonic schooling – are particularly popular sites for the recurrence of blackface. Just in the past fifteen years or so at this writing, Canadian media have reported blackface incidents taking place at Queens University in 2005 (MacMillan, 2005); Wilfrid Laurier University in 2007 (HueyFreeman222, 2007); the University of Toronto in 2009 (Mahoney, 2009); Hautes Études Commerciales (HEC) Montréal of the Université de Montréal in 2011 (Montpetit, 2011); McGill University in 2012 (McGill Daily, 2012); Mayfield Secondary School in Caledon, Ontario, in 2013 (Karstens-Smith & Rushowy, 2013); Brock University in 2014 (CBC News, 2014b); and the private Collège de Montréal in 2017 (TVA Nouvelles, 2017). Also reported in the media are a blackface incident during the Montreal student protests of 2012 (Morgan, 2012) and one associated with a student at Citadel High School in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in 2019 (CTV Atlantic, 2019). The 2010 Report of the Task Force on Campus Racism of the Canadian Federation of Students reports a blackface incident at the University of Windsor (Canadian Federation of Students-Ontario, 2010, p. 7). Two of the three blackface incidents involving Justin Trudeau, reported by media in 2019, took place in school contexts: one in the 1980s while he was a student at Collège Jean-de-Brébeuf, a private high school in Montreal, and the other in 2001 at a teachers’ function at West Point Grey Academy, a private high school in Vancouver (CBC News, 2019). Besides these, there are several other blackface incidents at schools and universities that participants in this study referred to but that had escaped mainstream media attention.

Yet despite this clear relationship between (often elite) schools and universities and blackface, there is also an intriguing aura of the unexpected that seems to attend blackface incidents at these sites in public
Blackface perpetrators always declare they were not aware of other blackface incidents, claim wide-eyed ignorance of the racist history of blackface, and express bewilderment that their allegedly harmless antics caused racial offence. More significantly, schools and universities, as institutions, claim to be caught off-guard, and have been routinely unprepared (in the senses of being both ill equipped and unwilling) to comprehensively deal with blackface. Based on interviews with university administrators in this research, it seems clear that universities in particular largely consider blackface an unanticipated anomaly that conflicts with their institutions’ values.

This chapter explores what can be known about the nature of antiblackness in Canadian universities through the lens of the blackface incidents and other negative experiences that Black students have there. Contrary to what universities claim, this chapter argues that where blackface occurs in schooling spaces it is a performance fostered by those spaces and the relations that constitute them. The chapter attempts to make sense of what it is about sites of dominant schooling that might be so conducive to blackface. Here, that universities and schools are antiblack is not what is at issue. I argue alongside a legion of Black scholars (see, e.g., Hampton, 2020; Harney & Moten, 2015; Kelley, 2016b; Walcott, 2018; Wilder, 2014) who have long maintained that it stands to reason that universities, as microcosms and indeed crucial arms of the antiblack, settler-colonial state, are also antiblack. Instead, I demonstrate from interview data the ways that university administrators see blackface as surprising when it occurs on their campuses, and the ways that Black people experience being considered as surprise at university. I argue that this phenomenon of surprise is produced by the inability of the university to account for Blackness within itself because of its constitutive and mandatory antiblackness. This antiblackness, in turn, is constituted by the university’s function as a site for producing rationality and rational Canadian subjectivities precisely through making Black people its outside. Having laid this foundation, I then examine the work that blackface does, especially at universities, and how it is that blackface as an ostensibly individual but recurring and therefore ritual performance, comes to be such an apposite expression of antiblackness at school, yet so predictably unpredictable. Ultimately, I assert that the stubbornly postracialist claims of the university to be a site of progressive rationality, as well as its attempts to reconstitute itself as such against the Black insurgency that also occurs there, continually reproduce the motivations for blackface in all its antiblack meanings, as well as why it must always be considered surprise. Throughout, I draw on Katherine McKittrick’s (2006) articulation of
Blackness as surprise in Canada and Sylvia Wynter’s (1979) discussion of the Sambo figure.

Blackface as Surprise: “It’s Not the School’s Values!”

Sara Ahmed’s (2012) important phenomenology of the university and the diversity work that takes place there points out that university administrators are often “shocked” that their institutions are perceived as bastions of whiteness. Despite the abundant evidence to support such a perception, administrators identify the problem to be that the perception is inaccurate rather than that the populations of faculty, staff, and students are, in fact, overwhelmingly white. As a result, they consider it their priority to set about “changing perceptions of whiteness rather than changing the whiteness of universities” (p. 34, emphasis in original). Here, a discourse of surprise functions to establish the university as racially egalitarian against the stark evidence to the contrary.

A similar but distinct dynamic of surprise seems to be at work with respect to the occurrence of blackface and other occurrences of antiblackness at the university. Seldom do university administrators’ reflections seem to turn inward to consider how these occurrences might indicate a constitutive antiblackness of the university. Schools and universities, through the administrators to whom it falls to deal with blackface incidents, generally insist on seeing blackface as a surprising anomaly when it occurs on their campuses. For example, when we asked an administrator at University 4:

**INTERVIEWER:** In your opinion, is there anything present on your campus or on campuses in general that might influence students to wear blackface?

**ADMINISTRATOR:** No. Not really. Honestly, not that more than anything else. Not that more than anything else. Obviously there are elements of ignorance. That is very present. But I wouldn’t foresee [blackface].

(U4A2)

Not only is blackface unforeseen from their perspectives, but university administrators and spokespersons we interviewed repeatedly spoke of blackface as contrary to their institutions’ values. In this vein, the University 4 administrator goes on to say:

If we had an incident of this magnitude in third year – that is, after having had these students for two, two-and-a-half years – I would have been surprised and terribly disappointed, and obviously our reaction would
have really been different. In this case, what was distinctive was that these students had not spent – When it happened, you have to understand that the students hadn’t yet spent even a half-hour in class. (U4A2)

According to this administrator and others we spoke to, blackface incidents are perpetrated by new students who hold values that are alien to those of the university. They only occur when the students have not yet had the opportunity to be taught to conform to the university’s values. For this administrator, had the students been at the university longer, they never would have engaged in blackface. Though this administrator is indeed referring to a blackface incident that occurred during a frosh event, they fail to account for the more senior student leaders responsible for animating the event, who had been at the university for some time and who were present throughout the incident. Instead, by blaming new students for such incidents, the administrator discursively sets the university off as a space where the antiblackness that motivates blackface is not endemic. Using the same discursive strategy, an administrator at University 3 told us:

So I think about the kinds of attitudes and values that students come in with that have been ingrained in them for eighteen years. And then we try very hard in four years to help them question and reframe and rethink about them, and have greater success with some than others. But I don’t know that you can ever assume full responsibility for totally aligning every single person who is part of your community to have thoughts that uphold the high standard of your inclusivity and respect for diversity. (U3A1)

As with the University 4 administrator, this administrator also considers their university to possess ingrained egalitarian values. They do not consider the possibility that the university may, in fact, be a site where exclusionary values might reside or that there might be any continuity between societal values within and outside of the university. Instead, these and other administrators we spoke to at several other institutions narrate the university as largely at risk from the students who enter it year after year with inexplicable values fostered by their unenlightened families and communities located beyond the university. The university must constantly stem the threat to its values coming from “out-there.” It is ostensibly faced with the gargantuan challenge of ensuring that it inculcates the university’s superior, more enlightened values in each new student. Indeed, another University 3 administrator repeatedly deployed a metaphor of things “percolating” beneath the surface,
positioning universities in general as constantly playing whack-a-mole through educational interventions to try to prevent things from “boiling over” before students can be set straight:

So we do get a lot of what I call the under-the-surface boiling things … It’s boiling and what are we doing to address it? So I think that’s really where I would say the majority of campuses are. … There are things that maybe we don’t know about that just are percolating at the surface. … Like the incidences [sic] that come out, we can address … Albeit bad, it is an opportunity to correct the behaviour, and we hang our hat on that as saying as an institution we worked with these people. … You know, we can sell that! I am more concerned about the people that we don’t hear about, that are filled with hate. Because those people exist! But how do we find them before we’ve reached the boiling point? … And this is my big fear. Like, every day when I wake up I am like, “Are we at a tipping point? Is it just all under the surface and things are just coming out?” Like, we do our best to educate, but again we go back to the beliefs and values that people have. (U3A2)

A hard-to-identify, boogeyman student who would perpetrate blackface is made out to be far different from the normative student who has been there longer and, having been educated, now properly represents the university and bears its values. However, the university never fully knows the extent of the invading-racism problem, and the success of its educational interventions is not guaranteed. In making this argument, this administrator broadens the university’s ability to absolve itself of accountability for blackface and other student expressions of antiblackness on their campuses whether the perpetrators are new or not.

Overall, then, the ways in which university spokespersons discuss these incidents make blackface surprising where it occurs within the university community. Antiblackness and other structures that produce inequitable conditions are to be understood as located outside the university, though they constantly try to enter and overwhelm. The university, by contrast, is seen as an enlightened space committed to equity and diversity. For these administrators, nothing in the university’s relations, practices, or structures could be implicated in the production of antiblackness.

Thus, a discourse of surprise functions in the context of blackface in the Canadian university to establish and recuperate an ostensible racial egalitarianism, much as Ahmed (2012) has identified in universities elsewhere. This egalitarianism is fundamental to the legitimacy of the contemporary liberal university. Yet I argue in the following sections
that the discourse of surprise has a much broader reach, and accomplishes a great deal more in the Canadian university. Surprise is not only applied to blackface incidents, but to the presence of Black people at the university, and is used in this way to establish a characteristic far more fundamental to how universities are conceived – that is, the “Human” faculty of rationality and intellectualism, of which Blackness and Black people are considered the antithesis.

Black People as Surprise at the University

In contrast to these administrators’ views, Black students, staff, and faculty we spoke to do not experience the university as constitutively egalitarian, and do not understand blackface or the antiblackness that drives it as being contrary to the university’s values. Again, I do not suggest that the idea that Black people experience the university as antiblack is a new insight. Instead, my objective in this section is to highlight that the experiences they shared in the context of discussions about blackface were those in which they were positioned as out of place, and therefore as unexpected, at the university in much the same way that blackface is always a surprise. And rather than simply attributing these incidents to the behaviour of a few, or even many, ignorant individuals behaving independently of the university’s values, the Black participants felt that the values that undergird them characterized the university context.

In our interviews with Black people about blackface, the conversation inevitably turned to what they considered to be this broader context of antiblackness at the university. Identifying how he does not find the university a welcoming place, Donovan, a student at University 2, says: “You mentioned [residence hall A] and the student union, and all these kinds of things and places: I don’t really feel like that’s a place that is warm and friendly” (U2FG2P1). Miremba, a student at University 1, goes further, pointing out the ways in which, to her, the university fails to foster the equity values it proclaims, making the university climate in fact perilous for Black students:

When I pay my school fees, they tell me, “You’re coming to a safe space where it’s a diverse university where your views will be appreciated, your identity will be respected.” But then when they don’t do that, how do you get them to become responsible for that? … I do know Black students who have considered, on several occasions, leaving this campus because they didn’t feel emotionally safe, mentally safe [“absolutely,” another participant whispers], or just capable of handling the isolation on this campus as a Black student. (U1BSOFGP2)
Miremba’s feeling of being pushed out despite the university’s lip-service equity is echoed by other participants across the university sites at which we conducted interviews. Jacqueline, a professor at University 5, speaks to this Black experience from a faculty perspective:

Most universities across Canada have some kind of equity or diversity policy. And most of them are unenforced. My university has a beautiful one that mentions race and religion and disability and all that stuff, but when it comes time to hire, who is looking over our shoulders to see that the people that are shortlisted and get flown in for the lecture actually are those diverse constituents? Nobody! ... People don’t want to talk about this, but there is a Black brain drain where we go to the States because they want us down there. And then some of us never come back, because the job never opens up for us. Some of our best and brightest are not even in the country because we are not wanted in the country. So of course you’re going to leave! (U5F3)

In different ways, Donovan’s, Miremba’s, and Jacqueline’s assessments all communicate that they do not find the university egalitarian and welcoming for Black people, but instead hostile and exclusionary. It is a space where Black people cannot be at ease, characterized by barriers to their entry and by structures that push them out.

Other Black participants tell a more specific story of their exclusion that involves the ways in which white people at the university, both faculty and students, express astonishment at their presence. From them, we come to understand that it is not just blackface that is perpetually shocking at the university, but that Black people are also confronted by various levels of surprise. Sometimes this surprise is hostile, where white people at the university seem outright offended at Black people’s presence. For example, Zawadi at University 2 tells us:

When they were building University 2 they did not have anyone who looks like me in mind. So it’s a space that I have had problems with. When I was doing my undergrad – talk about blackface – I went to the student union and there was this [white] guy who just looked at me glaringly with a friend of mine. It’s almost like … he was offended that I was in the student union working out. ... White supremacy works in different ways, and this is one of the ways that it works. (U2FG2P4)

In other cases, the sense of surprise is expressed much more matter-of-factly. So, for example, in the midst of a blackface event at Hautes Études Commerciales, the business school affiliated with the Université de Montréal, Anthony Morgan, a McGill student at the time who
experienced this incident and brought it to media attention, reported that when the students in blackface noticed his presence they remarked in the midst of their gaiety, “Hey we have a real black person here” (Montpetit, 2011). As they pretended to be Black, it hadn’t occurred to this almost exclusively white group of students that they might encounter someone who actually was Black. They were surprised, if thrilled, to have a “real Black person” walk by. In this instance, what is particularly interesting about this reaction of surprise is that in 2019 38% of the international students at HEC Montréal, or 1,590 students, were from Africa – representing a not insignificant 10% of a student body of 14,356¹ (HEC Montréal, 2020). It is unlikely that the numbers would have been drastically different in 2011. Therefore, the sense of surprise occurred despite the regularly visible presence of Black students.

Similarly expressing the matter-of-fact ways in which Black people are presumed not to have a legitimate place at the university, and therefore are considered surprising there, Franklin, a University 2 student, says in a focus group discussion that had turned to the topic of violence at the university:

I feel I can say that [I have experienced violence]! Not particularly in my program, but there are certain areas where you may hang around where I’ve gotten, like, “Why are you here?” “What got you here in this university?” Definitely I got that when I was residence staff. You know, “Out of all the interviews, and all the people that applied for this” – it was never [my] skills. It was like, “how did you get this?” as if it was out of the realm, my getting this position, and [a question of] whether you got this because of your colour. And that was very violent! (U2S1)

Franklin’s experience again indicates the presumed out-of-placeness of Black people at the university, despite a Black student population that can be estimated at around 5% at his university. The numbers of Black students at Canadian universities are usually disproportionately small

¹ There are no existing statistics for 2011, the year that this event occurred. Of course, the group “African students” is not the same as “Black students,” since there are certainly Black students who are not international students, and students from the continent of Africa who might not be Black. HEC Montréal, like other Montreal universities, does not gather race-based data, making it difficult to know much about Blackness at these institutions. Quoting this statistic here is not an attempt to carelessly participate in the erasure of Blackness (which I discuss later in the chapter), but gives us a crude sense of the proportion of one part of the overall student population at HEC that is visibly Black.
across the board. Nevertheless, Black people, whether students, staff, or faculty, have long been found at the Canadian university – certainly since at least the mid-nineteenth century (see, e.g., Queen’s Encyclopedia, n.d.; SSMU University Affairs, n.d.). Our numbers, though low, are not negligible. Therefore, the repeated construction of Black people as surprise at the university requires explanation.

Franklin’s experience also draws our attention to a very specific logic that informs how Black people are cast out of the university community and considered surprise there: Black people are often considered imposters at the university because they are presumed not to have the credentials or the intelligence that would qualify them to be there. This presumption is reflected in Shanna’s experience at University 6:

**Shanna:** I have friends who are African like me … Some of us experience situations that are really not pleasant in our classes. We feel that some teachers rank the students, and that they tend to consider Africans as, well, not excellent, not competent, and it shows in the grades. [A friend of mine] said that in her class she always stays at the same level … She was in a group of five, with two foreigners, a Mexican and [herself], an African. And the ranking was first the Quebecois students, then the Mexican, then her. Even though there was a [white] Quebecoise who came to her all the time, and she helped her with her homework because they were friends. But whenever the teacher grades their work, she notices that the other person gets better grades than her. (U6FG1)

Shanna and her friends have a common experience of feeling that they are being graded on the basis of preconceived racist assessments rather than by the quality of their work. Even more clearly demonstrating the relationship between Black out-of-placeness, white surprise, and the presumption that Black people lack the intelligence to be at university, Achille, also in the University 6 focus group with Shanna, tells us:

**Achille:** The first day when we arrived for class, there were only white people. Basically, I was the only Black person. And the prof, when he came in, asked me if I wasn’t mistaken. I told him that no, I wasn’t mistaken, and I gave him the course number. And he said, “Yeah. OK,” that he just thought that I was mistaken. Just like that! I don’t know why, but it was me that he asked if I was in the wrong course, as if – But it was a computer course – computer mathematics, so perhaps he was thinking – **Shanna:** (interrupting): – that you wouldn’t have the ability to take that course!

**Achille:** There you go! So – (U6FG1)
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The matter-of-fact way in which, on sight, Achille is considered out of place in this university classroom by his instructor, before they had had any chance to interact on any level, and the ways in which the instructor seemed to shy away from offering an explanation (though no explanation would make sense) again suggest the antiblack foundations of surprise. Drawing on their experience, both Shanna and Achille surmise that this instructor’s response is likely caused by a presumption that Achille is not intelligent based on his bodily presentation as Black.

Achille’s, Shanna’s, and Franklin’s stories reflect a presumption of Black incompetence in university that is a long-standing one in Canada. In fact, the suspicious type of student evaluation that Shanna experienced is strikingly similar to the grievance that sparked the 1969 Sir George Williams Affair at what is now Concordia University in Montreal, in which six Black students accused a biology professor, apparently not the most racist of his colleagues, of unjust grading (Butcher, 1971, p. 80; Forsythe, 1971, p. 7). LeRoi Butcher wrote in 1971 about the Sir George Affair that apparently a history of strained relations stemming from the differential treatment he meted out to the students on the basis of race was common knowledge to [students]. Moreover, the students reported that they themselves experienced a phenomenon which, in itself, could go a long way in substantiating the pristine theory of the intellectual inferiority of the Black race. (p. 87)

Shanna’s experience gestures to how enduring and deeply embedded these foregone conclusions about Blackness are in the university setting in the present, and to the apparent willingness of certain white instructors to bear out these assumptions in their grading, regardless of students’ actual performance.

Black scholars in Canada have written of the association of Black people with a lack of intelligence, speaking about how it extends to presumptions about Black faculty. Daniel (2019) discusses the ways in which faculty, university administrators, and students all challenge the legitimacy of Black faculty to hold the positions that they do. Daniel concludes that “within the broader social dialogue around constructions of Blackness, in the ivory towers of academia, Blacks are at best afforded the option to be a student. The union between Blackness and intellectualism remains an unlikely combination in the minds of many White faculty members” (p. 30, emphasis added).

Overall, then, for these participants, and Black people more generally as reflected in the higher education literature, the university is hardly
a location that values equity and diversity, much less one that values them as Black people. Instead, through its practices, equity policies that are enforced casually if at all, and the common-sense behaviour of non-Black members of the university community, Black people are re-presented as belonging beyond, and not within, the space of the university. We see that White people at the university are surprised when they encounter Black people in student spaces despite the fact that Black people have long been a part of Canadian universities. Together, Zawadi’s, Franklin’s, Shanna’s, and Achille’s accounts narrate the ways in which the surprise at Blackness is routinely grounded in a matter-of-fact logic that concludes that they are not intelligent enough to properly be there.

**Surprise and the Production of Blacklessness**

In the chapter “Nothing’s Shocking: Black Canada” in Katherine McKittrick’s (2006) book, McKittrick argues that through the active erasure of evidence of Black people in Canada

unseen black communities and spaces … privilege a transparent Canada/nation by rendering the landscape a “truthful” visual purveyor of past and present social patterns. Consequently, “truthful” visual knowledge regulates and normalizes how Canada is seen – as white, … not black, not non-white, not Indigenous, but white. (pp. 96–7, emphasis in original)

The “truth,” then, of a white Canada is produced by a “systemic blacklessness” (p. 93) and is necessary to recreate Canada as a white space. This “truth” can be achieved through a technique of surprise. Discussing the case of Marie-Joseph Angélique, the enslaved Black woman violently executed for allegedly burning down Old Montreal in 1734, McKittrick writes that biographies such as those of Angélique “invoke … a number of surprises that are astonishing simply because they take place in Canada, a nation that has and is still defining its history as Euro-white, or nonblack” (pp. 91–2). McKittrick continues: “the element of surprise is contained in the material, political, and social landscape that presumes – and fundamentally requires – that subaltern populations have no relationship to the production of [Canadian] space” (p. 92). McKittrick argues that whether it is by the presumed absence from Canada that informs the moment prior to the “shocking” discovery, or by the “wonder” and “astonishment” produced in the moment subsequent to discovery, the politics of rendering Blackness as surprise make it constitutively and perpetually *not* properly a part of dominant
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Canadian geographies (pp. 92–3). It is, therefore, Canada’s “ceaseless outlawing of blackness” (p. 93) that makes the technique of surprise both necessary and possible.

I argue here, then, that the way in which Blackness is ritually rendered surprise at the university is related to a particular need to maintain a fiction of the university as constitutively Blackless. I shall argue that the construction of the university as Blackless, like the construction of Canada as Blackless, is an active (if deeply psychically embedded and not necessarily conscious) process that occurs because of what is at stake for white Western subjectivities, rather than as a result of casual Eurocentric oversight, or a benignly mistaken conviction that Black presence at the Canadian university is only recent. It happens even though and in fact especially because Black people are at the university, where our presence challenges the university’s antiblack colonial desires. The normative functioning of the university depends upon its being Blackless.

The University as Producer of Antiblack Canadianness

Radical scholars have convincingly argued the inherent coloniality and antiblackness of the North American university (see, e.g., Grande, 2018; Harney & Moten, 2013; Kelley, 2016b; Wilder, 2014). Indeed, Western state schooling, and in this case specifically Canadian schooling, has always been antagonistic to Blackness. In Rosalind Hampton’s careful genealogy of a Canadian university, Hampton points out that Canadian state schooling efforts were initially established to convert free and enslaved Indigenous people as well as enslaved Black people to Christianity on the one hand, and to train those who would be engaged in these conversion efforts on the other (Hampton, 2020, p. 15; see also Bramble, 2000, pp. 101–2). Where this evangelism occurred in the fledgling colonies that became Canada it is impossible to divorce it from the broader (social, political, and economic) colonial relations that made it possible, and which it was intended to advance. Education at this time would necessarily draw lines of distinction between the locations of colonizer/settler, colonized, and enslaved.

As the Canadian settler-colonial project progressed, schooling took the form of increasingly violent efforts to assimilate or annihilate Indigenous people with a view towards their disappearance, and to define the nation as white over against Black and racialized populations in Canada (Hampton, 2020, p. 16). Universities, first established in Canada in the nineteenth century, played a central role in producing ideas of Canadianness – geographical and political – and patriotic Canadian identity (Axelrod & Reid, 1989, p. xvii; Hampton, 2020, p. 18). Much like
all Western knowledge, these notions of Canadianness were developed in tandem with, and upon the foundation of, racial logics that delimited what it meant to be civil(ized), respectable, rational – indeed Human (Hampton, 2020, p. 17; Wynter, 2003; see also Goldberg 1993).

In the mid-twentieth century, with the advent of global decolonization movements, but more importantly as the nation state’s labour needs shifted, Canada began to narrate itself differently as egalitarian and multicultural (Thobani, 2007, p. 15). While not divesting from longer-standing liberal and Enlightenment discourses of rationality and respectability, the Canadian university made vital contributions to the construction of Canadianness as reasonable – that is, as above the logics that drove slavery and colonialism. Canadian academics, like politicians, sought to establish that Canada had not been involved, and certainly was not presently involved, in such unpalatable relations as colonialism, whether within or beyond its borders (Cooper, 2006, p. 8; Hampton, 2020, p. 62; Hudson, 2010; S. Razack, 2002, p. 2; Walcott & Abdillahi, 2019, p. 54). With specific reference to Black people, as Carmen Poole (2012) has shown, academic historians and authors of Canadian history texts systematically erased pre-Confederation Black experience and Canada’s involvement in slavery and the slave economy of the Atlantic world from dominant historical narratives in order to advance the mythology of an egalitarian, multicultural Canada. One effect of this historiography has been to mystify the concept of Blackness with/in Canada. It erases Black people from the story of the making of Canada, and repositions Blackness as outside the nation, only legible as recently arrived (Poole, 2012; Walcott, 2001).

Hand in hand with this erasure, the Canadian university has actively resisted the study of Black life qua Black in Canada, as Peter Hudson and Aaron Kamugisha (2014), Rinaldo Walcott (2014a), and Walcott and Idil Abdillahi (2019) have all most recently forcefully demonstrated. Universities in Canada have by and large opposed Black people’s calls for the creation of Black Studies departments, even in the wake of global decolonization and civil rights struggles when universities in other parts of the world, such as the United States, were doing so (see, e.g., Hampton, 2020, pp. 24, 148). Canadian universities have since not made the kinds of infrastructural investments that would support Black Studies, and specifically Black Studies in/of Canada (Walcott, 2014a, p. 279). It is only within the last few years that initiatives of this sort have been achieved at Dalhousie University (a Black African Diaspora minor in 2018), York University (Black Canadian Studies certificate, in 2018), and Queen’s University (a minor program in Black Studies, launched in 2021). Outside of these academic structures, Black scholars who take
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up Black Studies in Canada are scattered across departments and disciplines, while the study of Black life in Canada is taken up in traditional departments, if at all, solely through such filters as area studies (African and Caribbean Studies) or migration studies (Hudson & Kamugisha, 2014, pp. 6–7; Walcott, 2014a, p. 276), reinforcing the non-recognition of Black people as Black, and locating Black people as properly from outside of Canada. National as well as disciplinary boundaries are imposed in such a way as to stymie the ability to make sense of Blackness in Canada and its expansiveness beyond such boundaries. Disciplinary boundaries further resist the transformation that Black Studies might bring to the ways in which these disciplines are dominantly conceived (Hudson & Kamugisha, 2014, p. 7; Walcott & Abdillahi, 2019, p. 56), instead reducing Black Studies to identity politics. Black Studies is cast out of the realm of the social sciences and humanities through an academic antiblackness whereby Black people’s experience loses its specificity and is both used as analogy (Sexton, 2010, 2016) and reduced to an inconsequential shade (if not shadow) of an ostensibly universal human experience (always already white). The message is constantly that knowledge of Black people in Canada, and Black people’s knowledge more generally, is not worthwhile knowledge and does not contribute anything unique to existing understandings of the human condition in Canada or beyond (Hudson & Kamugisha, 2014; Walcott, 2014a).

Therefore, the ways in which the university locates Black people outside of the university both physically and conceptually are in symbiotic relationship with its roles of negating Black knowledge and producing antiblack knowledge that secure Canadian innocence and places Black people outside of Canada and outside of the Human. The investment in a Blackless university through surprise is therefore not a casual one. Black people and the scholarly knowledge our lives make possible threaten to undo not only racial ideologies, but also dearly and deeply held notions of the reasonable postracial Canadian state, what it might mean to be a good, respectable Canadian, and indeed what it might mean to be Human in Canada.

The University as Producer of Rational Subjectivity

Given the role of the university as described here, Black people and Black knowledge at the university create all kinds of trouble for those who would engage the university transactionally for what it can offer them in terms of identity. For ultimately, universities are not simply learning and credentializing spaces in any simplistic understandings of those terms. Rather, they are also spaces through which social subjects
craft their identities, and wherein identifications such as “Canadian,” “learned,” and “qualified” are always already racialized.

In a chapter titled “Keeping the Ivory Tower White,” Carol Schick (2002) highlights the ways in which students at a Canadian university use their affiliation with the space of the university to establish a foothold on bourgeois, white Canadian respectability. Students construct themselves as respectable white citizens by contrasting themselves with the racialized “Other” who is seen as belonging outside the walls of the university. Schick writes that the discourses upon which students rely to bolster these respectable, rational identities rely on the university as the home of official white rationality and knowledge – the markers by which a taxonomy of difference may be established and where “difference from” means “unequal to.” Here is the mythological, safe, and pure place of abstraction and objectivity; the world of knowledge and theory; a place for the “disembodied” mind … the real-world politics of gender, culture, … are strongly resisted. … this space must be maintained; the identities – those who are in control and those who are not – cannot be confused. (pp. 109–10)

Here, being understood as white and respectable fundamentally requires being understood as “rational,” and the university is a crucial space through which this rationality may be claimed. Indeed, Western universities are famously reliant on a fiction of the university as a self-governed community of rational persons (read: elite white men) who resolve any conflicting interests among them through scholarly debate on ostensibly neutral ground that is presumed not to be shot through with racialized and other inequitable social relations. Those persons whose experience would suggest that the university is otherwise, who insist that our bodies cannot be separated from who we are and how we know, and who point out that the university’s structures are not neutral but rather raced, classed, and gendered, are thought to bring “irrationality” into the space of the university. Therefore, if the white rational identities that these students invest so much into establishing are to stand, Indigenous, Black, and other racialized people along with their politics must be located definitively beyond the space of the university, and the boundaries between inside and outside must be reinforced. For these students, discourses of belonging and unbelonging (which are inextricable from discourses of race) are crucial to the success of their identity formation as rational, bourgeois white (or almost white) Canadians (Schick, 2002, p. 116). Schick points out that a majority of the participants interviewed for her study were of working-class, non-British,
European ethnic backgrounds (p. 103), an insecure and unstable white identity in the context of Canada to be sure. These students use the university to establish themselves as rational and reasonable (p. 108) even as they also use it to appropriate the currency of the more highly valued and secure social location of respectable, bourgeois, (white) British settlers (p. 106). It is therefore particularly salient that it is mostly Indigenous persons over against whom the students in Schick’s study crafted their dominant identities in this instance (p. 106).

Schick’s analysis of the Canadian university echoes the more specific arguments that Sylvia Wynter has long made with regard to schooling, the university, and academic knowledge. Wynter has resolutely and repeatedly argued that academics, particularly (but not exclusively) those in the social sciences and humanities, are responsible for perpetuating racist understandings of the Human. These ideas first emerged in Renaissance humanism, were extended through Darwinian thought, and are continually mobilized through various academic discourses specifically to appoint blackness to a space of negation beyond the category of Human (e.g., Wynter, 1994a, 1994b, 1995, 1996, 2006).

We see how the space of the university affords a similar and related process of identity formation against Blackness in Rosalind Hampton’s study of McGill University. Hampton identifies the ways in which the study’s Black participants experience the university as a bounded bubble, deeply invested in the production of Anglophone/British, elite whiteness (Hampton, 2020, p. 75). In this case, it is also Black people who are placed beyond the Canadian university’s boundaries through its social relations, enabling others to use the space of the university to be created or reconfirmed as white (see p. 110).

However, as discussed in the previous section, it is not only whiteness that the university produces through its relationship to Blackness. The words of one of Hampton’s participants, CH, make this rather obvious. CH says (without melancholy, to be clear): “I just don’t feel that I am a reflection of what McGill is. At all. I feel like I am its antithesis. I feel like I am its, its darkness. And I like that” (Hampton, 2020, p. 134). In CH’s experience at the university, her existence as a Black woman is not simply a foil against which others can know themselves as white. Rather, she becomes aware that she is understood to be the embodiment of everything that a respectable “McGill person” is not, or ought not to be. One can know oneself as of/from McGill simply by not being who CH is. Of course, CH’s experience is not unique, nor is it limited to this one university. The Black people I spoke to in my blackface study across several universities generally echoed the same experience, as indicated above. This recurring Black experience at universities
and other educational institutions focuses our attention on the ways in which Blackness is not just the antithesis of whiteness, but the antithesis of broader hegemonic Canadian constructions of Western Humanity (Walcott, 2014c, 2018; see also Dumas, 2018; Wynter, 2003). Where the dominant role of the university is the production of educated (i.e., rational), patriotic, respectable, bourgeois, Canadian citizens worthy of inheriting the neoliberal settler-colonial state (see hampton, 2020, p. 19), CH and other Black people exist as the negation of all these identities.

Against this background, the multiple experiences of being encountered as surprise shared by the Black people who participated in this study can be understood. If Blackness is in fact the antithesis of everything that the university is committed to producing, if that product can only be known in opposition to what Black people are, then Black people cannot properly be a part of the university community. By this logic, Blackness can only ever be surprising when encountered there. Recalling McKittrick, we see that surprise enables the fundamental rendering of the university as ontologically Blackless, regardless of how long Black people have been a part of the Canadian university, in order that it can go about the essential business of producing that which Blackness is not.

Of Rationality/Intelligence, Black Embodiment, and Blackface

The university’s antiblackness is not simply directed at a nebulous concept of being Black. As the antithesis of the university’s disembodied rational minds, Blackness, with the attendant associations with irrationality and lack of intelligence, is ontologically embodied. Black Canadian scholar George Dei (2017) has noted the associations of the body with irrationality and lack of intelligence in the context of the university:

Based on my skin color, I am often seen simply as an “emotional” being. I am constantly being urged to be a “rationale” [sic] thinker without questioning the basis of such Western logics of rationality. ... Our [i.e., Black scholars’] presence is under a constant gaze ... Our experiences can be invalidated, our knowledge-base questioned; and when we are critical, our scholarship is not only suspect and labeled as “anti-intellectual,” we are often seen as angry intellectuals without a cause. (p. 11).

In the antiblack semiotic field, the Black body visually conjures these ideas of irrationality and unintelligence. Therefore, academic antiblackness is actively directed against the presentation of the Black body, as
in Achille’s, Zawadi’s, and Franklin’s experiences. Jalil Bishop Mustaffa (2017), drawing on Cornell West, alludes to this when he writes:

White supremacy defines itself “by convincing [Black people] that their bodies are ugly, their intellect is inherently underdeveloped, their culture is less civilized, and their future warrants less concern than that of other peoples” … The higher education system has helped operate and engineer all of these functions of white supremacy. (p. 713, emphasis added)

Lack of intelligence is therefore conceived of as housed in “ugly” Black bodies, and the university is implicated in the propagation of both concepts and the relationships between them.

Sylvia Wynter (1979) is helpful in further understanding how Blackness as the antithesis of rational Human Western subjectivities is signalled in the white Western imagination by the presentation of the Black body. Wynter writes:

The Place of the NORM is constituted by and through the definition of certain desired attributes. The most desired attribute was the “intellectual faculty.” The sign that pointed to one’s possession of this attribute was whiteness of skin. The sign that pointed to its nonpossession was blackness of skin, which revealed non-human being. The black exists as the Symbolic Object constituting the Lack, the Void of these qualities that have been postulated as the absolute sign of the certainty of being human. That a man or almost a man can exist, lacking these things, sets into play the terror that these attributes can be lost. … The Negro then becomes the SYMBOLIC OBJECT OF THIS LACK WHICH IS DESIGNATED AS THE LACK OF THE HUMAN. (p. 152, emphatic caps in original)

Wynter here identifies the “intellectual faculty” as paramount for recognizing oneself as the Western Human subject. The Black body is set up within this construction of Humanness as the site at which the intellectual faculty cannot exist, while the white body is supposed to represent where the intellect faculty is expected. However, rationality and intelligence are by no means given just because one presents physically as a white person. White subjectivity, like all dominant subjectivities, is insecure, always at risk of falling into its constructed opposite – in this case the location of the constructed unintelligent Black subhuman (Wynter, 1979, p. 152).

The stakes around intelligence and Blackness are raised at the university in the context of (unevenly) broadening participation in higher education, and where, in its normative workings, intelligence is the main
currency reckoned and accumulated as merit, or to one’s “credit” (Harney & Moten, 2013) as belonging. They are particularly raised at the elite university, where being “good enough (ostensibly, smart enough) to get in” and “excelling” academically once “in” can potentially be mobilized to supersede social class, socio-economic, and ethnic identities that might otherwise suggest unbelonging (see Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2009). Academic excellence, or being “smart enough,” insulates one from being “kicked out.” The stakes are raised yet higher again by the increasingly neoliberal university with its increasingly unreasonable demands on students (and faculty), and where imposter syndrome reigns, but is misrecognized as a private psychological struggle rather than as a “public feeling” generated by neoliberal rationalities (Breeze, 2018; see also Gill, 2009; Reay, 2001). Under these conditions, the assurance of being “good enough” to belong is elusive and perilously fragile.

Wynter’s (1979, p. 150) analysis of the relationship between Blackness and intelligence goes on to explain the role of the Sambo stereotype in reifying the association of Blackness with the absence of the intellectual faculty. Sambo is a site onto which one can project repressed fears of not personally measuring up to the “Norm of mastery,” and at which those fears might be contained (p. 155). Of course, the Sambo stereotype is integral to blackface, having been deeply interwoven into it through minstrelsy (Lott, 1993, p. 7), making blackface the prototypical visual representation of Sambo.

It is with these conceptual tools that we might understand how it makes sense that blackface ritually occurs at sites of schooling—particularly at elite university sites where Black people are held at bay, and especially where Black people still dare to show up. Black people in the space of the university rupture the neat colour lines that are supposed to coincide with the university’s boundaries, and that permit the construction of respectable, rational white Canadian subjectivities. As academic insecurities generated by the structures of schooling abound, Black people’s presence potentially raises anxieties around falling out of respectability and into Blackness and what it ostensibly represents. This is managed in multiple ways institutionally, such as through well-worn discourses of merit and excellence. I suggest that blackface is another such strategy. The performance of Sambo, through grotesque blackface representations of the Black body, visually rehearses the antiblack geographies that attempt to fix both Blackness and intelligence in separate, non-coterminous locations. Blackface serves up conceptions of Blackness that potentially allay insecure white subjectivities and avert the fall into Blackness. Blackface is therefore experienced as soothing, as entertaining, as comic relief, not only by the performers of
blackface but also by those who witness it and engage in discussions around it.

An online comment pushing back against challenges to a blackface incident at McGill University unwittingly demonstrates this racial dynamic:

Blackface for Halloween. Seriously? Anything is an issue with these AA² students. As far as I’m concerned: a person can dress however they wish for Halloween. Isn’t that the point? The personification of a fear. I see Black students pretending to be White every day. Chill down. (Heidelmann, 2012)

Here, Blackness in the university space is read as both fearful and as always already an attempt to be white—or as whiteface. Its logic creates a blackface double-bind. The Black person who is read as not openly contesting the white identity-formation functions of university is read as attempting to be white, but their existence as such serves as justification for blackface. On the other hand, the Black persons whose presence reads as more evidently insurgent, presumably like those to whom Heidelmann is responding, are apparently refusing to play the university game on the expected terms. They are a threat, but one that can be contained by wearing blackface to “personify the fear.” In either case, Blackness is out of place and incites fear at the university, and blackface is apparently a reasonable response.

Overall, then, the university context is deeply conducive to blackface (explaining its prevalence there). Blackface is a product of the university space, not a haphazard intrusion upon it as university administrators are wont to claim. The philosophical and historical foundations of the university, and therefore its extant structures and social relations, produce blackface as a function of a constitutive antiblackness that is required to construct the university as a rational, egalitarian space that produces a particular kind of respectable Canadian subject. Donovan, a student nearing graduation at the time of his interview, shares a reflection that speaks to blackface as apt representation of the university and its structures:

You already know my loving relationship with education. That’s part of the reason why I said I wouldn’t argue with someone who had blackface

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² “AA” presumably means “African American” here, a problematic misnomer for Black students in Canada consistent with the logics that cannot conceive of Black people with/in Canada. From the context, the comment is clearly aimed at Black people.
who walked by me. And I also wouldn’t expect the university to respond to it when they don’t have course offerings that reflect any type of anything that speaks to the [Black] population, the discourse, the research, anything like that. I didn’t see myself reflected in the teaching staff. I don’t see myself around campus. … when I walk into the building and sit down in a class and I have [Black history] taught by – (trails off, but names a course taught by a white professor that other focus group members are aware, and wary, of). Anyways that’s a whole ’nother thing! To me that’s worse than blackface! … When I agitate something very small and say, “Oh, well you know what? I want course offerings that speak to my history, my heritage,” and I’m shut down by the dean … I kind of feel like when I walk into campus environments after leaving a class, I would only expect to see people wearing blackface. It sounds crass, but I’m being serious! (U2FG2P1)

For Donovan, blackface visually captures the problematic ethos of the university that resists Black people, resists Black knowledge, and resists calls for change. Rather than find blackface surprising at the university, Donovan finds it more surprising that he does not see it all the time, everywhere.

**Black Insurgency and Blackface**

There is another dimension to be attended to. Both Donovan’s reference to his attempts to agitate for change, however small, and Heidelmann’s earlier comment that “anything is an issue” for Black students (which evidently produces a measure of fear to non-Black others) indicate that Blackness at the university is not solely some threat passively represented by the Black body. These comments gesture to an important way in which Black people live and take up space at the university despite its antiblackness. They gesture to the place of insurgent Black activist politics at the university.

With regard to blackface and Black insurgency historically, Douglas A. Jones (2013) has warned that we not ignore the “black social and political formations that also framed the production of minstrelsy” (p. 27). Jones, like other scholars, argues that blackface minstrelsy originated in the North and West of the United States where, as in Canada, slavery operated on a smaller scale than in the US South and where slavery ended more gradually (p. 26). In these kinds of circumstances where colour lines are not as clearly defined, racial thinking and racist representation, such as blackface, flourish (Pieterse, 1992, p. 62). Yet Jones (2013) insists that blackface not be understood to have arisen as solely an anxious white response to a passive Black presence – an
approach that obscures and renders inconsequential what Black people were doing at the time. Instead, Jones argues that that blackface was also produced as a “buffer” against the increasingly assertive Black politics that characterized the North in the early 1800s, and which therefore also shaped the social-political context (p. 27). As a reaction to these conditions, blackface minstrelsy was an “aesthetic surrogate for the lack of slavery” under which terms it at least appeared to be clear who was free and who was not, who was respectable and who was not (p. 27).

Jones’s warnings are in order for our consideration of contemporary blackface at the Canadian university, where dominant notions of both Canada and the university as egalitarian reign but also where Black activism has, at least since the 1960s Sir George Affair and Congress of Black Writers, long been a “gift that shapes reform” and reveals Canada and the university, despite their efforts to say otherwise, as deeply implicated in the relations of slavery and its afterlife (Walcott & Abdillahi, 2019). Here, the posture of Black life, its insurgent presence, its daring to show up, is what Jones (2013), drawing on Nahum Chandler, describes as “the menace of … black ‘exorbitance’ … the destabilization of normative understandings of sociality and historicity by means of a politicized, epistemic surplus” (p. 22). It reminds us of CH in hamp-ton’s study, who identifies her status as the university’s antithesis as an identity she relishes. Black life lived on these terms at the university is not engaged in melancholic lament to somehow be made comfortable there, but as radical critique of the entire enterprise. Blackface at the university appears to also be mobilized as a response intended to push back against this critique.

That this active and activist Black presence at Canadian universities is salient to the ritual occurrence of blackface is evident not only from Donovan’s and Heidelmann’s comments, but in all the protracted debates after such incidents and the reactive white scholarship on the matter that take deep exception to Black indignation about blackface. These conversations attempt to resituate the university and Canada as bastions of fair-dealing rationality, often by asserting rights to (a paradoxically American understanding of) an unbridled freedom of expression. A recent example of this desperate effort appears in a book entitled University Commons Divided: Exploring Debate and Dissent on Campus. The author writes in reference to an incident including blackface and racist costuming at a university:

If there was insensitivity to issues of race in the selection of costumes by party-goers at the three universities, there was also a lack of proportion in the responses to them. These were Halloween parties, not cultural mis-
appropriations, Nazi mimicry, or manifestations of disapproval of other peoples. So describing them risks diminishing real problems of intolerance, discrimination, and racism. It also risks backlash from a bewildered public observing these episodes. No country in the world has adapted to multiculturalism more successfully than has Canada; most Canadians know that and appreciate our diversity. (MacKinnon, 2018, p. 45)

The interdependence of hegemonic conceptions of the university, rationality, respectability, and Canadianness is rather evident here. They come together in defence of blackface, and to reassert the challenge that Black insurgency presents to these notions and their production at the university.

Conclusion

What, then, of the phenomenon with which we began: that of blackface as surprise at the university? As we saw in administrators’ comments in an earlier section, making blackface surprise can serve as a pretext for not taking incidents of blackface seriously and for failing to take decisive action when they occur. However, this strategy accomplishes more than the immediate deflection of responsibility in the wake of a blackface incident. It accomplishes the more consequential outcome of denying that the university is a location that might produce blackface.

Once blackface is identified as surprise, the university aims its interventions at students ostensibly coming into the university as pollutants, and pursues these interventions in ways that never implicate the university itself. Donovan’s insights again help us to understand how this might look on the ground when he says:

Blackface is one of those things that if you are a white liberal, this is something you can take up as your fight. ... They can be a good white person and let you know that, “You know, Johnny, you shouldn’t do that because it’s offensive to Black people!” And then they are praised for it. It’s the same thing when you come to talk about the institution. I don’t want to hear University 2 chastise some kid from China for putting on blackface, and then kick me out of class for telling them that their courses are garbage and they don’t have anything for me. I’m not interested in that! And I don’t want them to be championing it and putting it in the newspapers: “Great job! People in schools all over are doing blackface, but University 2 did a great job because they kicked out the Chinese kid.” I don’t want to hear it! (U2FG2P1)
According to Donovan, when the university considers blackface to come from ignorant people originating beyond its boundaries, rather than something fostered by the social relations of the university, it makes a show of being progressive and ahead of its peers while it fails to look inward and continues unchecked with the everyday antiblackness that Donovan experiences. This is an institutional version of the postracialist claims to Canadian progressiveness that we saw on the individual level in Chapter 3.

Yet I have argued that the discourse of surprise has a much broader reach in that it is applied to the presence of Black people at the university. Applying McKittrick’s analysis of the politics of surprise, we can assert that presenting blackface as surprise is a necessary technique precisely because the university must deny that antiblackness is its bricks and mortar, and precisely because Black people are present at the university and use it as a site of Black insurgence. What is at stake for the university in doing this is its reputation as producer and home of rational, reasonable, liberal Canadian humanisms/humans: a position that claims to be at odds with colonialism, racism, and antiblackness but, as we have seen from Black participants’ assessments as well as from the genealogy of the Canadian university presented above, is only possible through colonialism, racism, and antiblackness. Therefore the university cannot somehow simply divest of the logics that produce blackface while hanging onto its role as producer of Canadian rationality. Making blackface surprise becomes a way for the university to perform itself as being beyond its inglorious constitution, and indeed in the particular mythologies created by Canada and the Canadian university, as never having been antiblack while it remains an institutional instantiation of slavery’s afterlife. The university is able to bridge its proclaimed values with the very different ones that keep it going.

Yet it also becomes evident that the more the university insists on its Canadian rationality and reasonableness, even in the name of responding to blackface but without owning up to its coloniality and antiblackness, the more it entrenches the very antiblack logics that both encourage blackface and produce that rationality in the first place. As such, far from contesting blackface, the university continually reproduces the motivations for blackface with its every expression that blackface is surprise, and drives antiblackness deeper with every insistence that the university is too rational, reasonable, and Canadian a place for blackface to be expected.