



Systemic racism and the status quo defenders

OPINION

« The systemic racism issues discussed at the press conference were not considered newsworthy...»



On February 24, 2023, Alain Babineau participated in a press conference and stated that a puppet that was being used in a show intended for children promoted negative stereotypes of Black people. The show featured a puppet called “Max” who travels from Montréal to Martinique. The show’s script posed no issues but Babineau and other Black persons at this press conference took exception to Max’s grotesque and monstrous representation of a Black person and considered it inappropriate for two West Island municipalities to be hosting this show, especially during Black History month.

Several journalists wrote articles criticizing Babineau, claiming his statements constituted an attack on artistic freedom. The city of Beaconsfield canceled the show. The city of Pointe-Claire permitted the show. Black History Month ended, and our fast-paced news cycle extinguished this story.

On August 30 Babineau participated in another press conference. This one announced the launch of a project to combat racial profiling Lawyers Against Racial Profiling (LARP). A media advisory had been sent to all media outlets inviting journalists to attend. At this press conference systemic racism issues were discussed, including the objective of the LARP project to help victims of racial profiling obtain the measure of justice in our courts that governments refuse to provide in our laws and public policies.

None of the journalists who wrote the articles critical of Babineau’s February 2023 statements attended this press conference and no media coverage was afforded by their media outlets. The systemic racism issues discussed at the press conference were not considered newsworthy for these journalists to report to their audiences.

Less than a week after this press conference Babineau received a demand letter from Max’s creator claiming that Babineau’s February 2023 statements were defamatory and demanding that Babineau publish a retraction of his statements failing which a lawsuit would be taken against him. The demand letter resuscitated the puppet controversy.

Recently, journalists not in the least bit interested in attending a press conference dealing with core racial profiling issues doubled down on their defence of the artistic freedom of an artist to use a monstrous and grotesque representation of Black people in a show intended for school aged children. Babineau was portrayed as an angry black man the public should ignore.

Those who expressed their indignation to the monstrous and grotesque representation of Black people that Max projected had valid reasons for their objections. In North American popular culture, since at least the pre-civil war era, Blacks have been portrayed as savage cannibals, hypersexual deviants, infantile buffoons, obedient servants, self-hating victims, and threats to society.



Systemic racism and the status quo defenders... Continued

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These grotesque anti-black depictions regularly took the form of objects such as puppets and comics. During the Jim Crow era demeaning minstrel shows were held across North America until 1950 including in Montreal. The articles trivializing Babineau for making a fuss over a puppet, reveal not only a lack of empathy but also incredible ignorance of or wilful blindness to the intergenerational trauma that continues to haunt the black experience.

The artistic freedom argument raised in the articles attacking Babineau is reductive and belies the true purpose of these articles to defend the status quo. Freedom of expression is not the one-dimensional concept espoused by this group of journalists.

An artist undoubtedly enjoys freedom of expression. But so does the artist's audience. Every artist who creates art incurs artistic risk. Risk that not everyone's interpretation of the artwork will align with that of the artist. An artist's freedom of expression comes with a concomitant obligation to accept criticism of the artist's work. An artist is free to create art.

Not everyone has to like it. Specifically, people are free to dislike an artist's work if it offends their sense of self-worth, or, if intended for a younger audience, does not meet the pedagogical expectations of parents and educators.

Black children should be able to see themselves in our institutions, in literature, the performing arts and the media. But is Max the image of a black person that we want our children, black or white, to internalize as a valid image of a Black person?

Does Max have to be black and grotesque? Can Max not be black and beautiful?

Legitimate human rights and pedagogical concerns underlie Babineau's criticism of this artist's puppet. Concerns shared by a good many people who are trying to build a more inclusive society.

Black people opposed to the use of this puppet are entitled to say so and to refuse to attend this show. They are also entitled to encourage like-minded individuals to not attend this show- it is called a boycott.

What Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. used to achieve social change. And they are also entitled to request that municipal, provincial, and federal governments not fund or otherwise support such artwork.

Considering the textbook gaslighting Alain Babineau has endured on this issue, whose freedom of expression is really under attack?

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