

# PORTRAYING THE OTHER: A POST-COLONIAL ANALYSIS OF *PORTRAIT OF AN ELDERLY BLACK MAN (ALFRED BUTLER?)* BY JOSHUA JOSEPH BIEHN. 1899.

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(see images after text)

This research explores Joshua Biehn's 1899 painting, which is presumed to depict Alfred Butler, a news vendor who lived and worked in Toronto (fig. 1). Little is known about Alfred Butler or Biehn's depiction of the African-American news vendor, however a small newspaper clipping bound to the backside of the work provides valuable information about Butler, Biehn, and popular ideas about race and class in fin-de-siècle Toronto (fig. 2).

In this primary source, we are privy to a familiarity with the artist, the subject, and a perspective of black people in Canada in the late 1800s. The article tells us that the painting was made after Butler's death, just before "he claimed to be in his hundredth year." The article also states that Butler "claimed to know the original Uncle Tom, in Harriet Beecher Stowe's famous narration." The writer discusses Butler's narrow escape from slavery as a thrilling adventure, trivializing the weight of his lack of social power and his struggle against structural discrimination. Finally, the author mentions that the painter Joseph "Biehn's specialty is negro portraiture." From these excerpts, we can cull two main ideas: that Butler's life and ideas were not taken seriously (as he is consistently noted to make unfounded claims, such as living to be one-hundred years old), and that Butler was treated as more of a sign of a black person, than an individual. In observing Biehn's portrait, it is also fitting to surmise that his depiction of Butler is closer to a caricature than to an ennobling likeness, since top hats were generally worn in the middle and upper classes, exclusively. Painting Butler with an out-of-place top hat exaggerates the uncomfortable reality that Butler was not white, and therefore, strange and laughable.

Although Butler is well dressed in a three-piece suit and top hat, many imperfections create an acute tension in the painting. His glasses hang awkwardly below his eyes, while he looks upward in respite. Perhaps most striking about Butler's appearance is that his clothes are completely in accordance with what would have been worn by his colonial counterparts, though his attire appears slightly worn. Here, in the slight imperfection of his dress is a clear example of the rupturing of societal and painterly norms.

The Algerian-French psychoanalyst and revolutionary Frantz Fanon has discussed the uneven conditions of colonial and post-colonial societies at length in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*,<sup>1</sup> and concludes that Black people, or the colonized, will attempt to appropriate and imitate the cultural code of their colonizer. Fanon discusses performativity and the demand for equality, when he states "I begin to suffer from not being a white man, to the degree that the white man imposes discrimination on me...I must bring myself as quickly as possible into step with the white world...Then – I will quite simply try to make myself white: that is, I will compel the white man to acknowledge that I am human."<sup>2</sup> Fanon reiterates this imbalance and the conscious need to be recognized and acknowledged as an equal. The same unfortunate reality of inferiority that Fanon faced would have permeated the life of Alfred Butler. A pressing example of a body that exists and performs in a similar sense to Alfred Butler's portrait is a group called *La Sape* in the major cities of Kinshasa and Brazaville in the Congos. Francesco Giuisti's photograph entitled *Bonga Bonga*, (2009) depicts a member of La Sape (which stands for the 'Society of Atmosphere Setters and Elegant People') in full dress (fig. 3). *Sapeurs* adopt Parisian fashions, often travelling to France to obtain lavish clothing, then returning home to live in relative squalor. These individuals can be seen as enfranchised actors, dressing to regain some sense of belonging in the post-colonial world, or as consumers of a fantasy that causes them more financial strife than equality. Nonetheless, Giuisti's depiction communicates an air of sophistication and stature despite a neglected environment, and Biehn's painting conveys an image of a dilapidated man

ripped out of his context. Ultimately, in taking on the colonizer's cultural codes and communicating them 'correctly,' the colonized will always be awkward and not fully accepted. By depicting these little flaws and imperfections in Butler's attire, Biehn (a White artist) failed to empower his subject.

After the War of 1812, Blacks from the United States were encouraged to settle in Canada,<sup>3</sup> however, slavery was not abolished until 1833, and racism persisted. In some cases, runaway slaves were extradited, and in other cases they were protected. Alfred Butler, being an escapee from Nashville, Tennessee, is likely to have experienced both positive, and powerfully negative reactions in Toronto, his new place of residence. George Hendrick and Willene Hendrick quote Henry Bibb in saying "Canadian Negro hate is incomparably meaner than the Yankee article, for Canadian Negro hate is not original. Copied, aped, deviltry is always meaner than the original diabolism."<sup>4</sup> The writers emphasize that prejudice against Blacks in Canada in the 1800's was very real, however they were needed as labourers, and in turn they were tolerated - but perhaps mocked, as Alfred Butler so acutely was.

Additionally, included in this analysis, is another painting by Biehn, entitled, *48th Highlanders, King Street, Toronto, Jubilee Day, 22nd June, 1897* (fig. 4). Biehn portrays a Canadian celebration, depicting an army of collectively cheerful white faces marching down a major artery of Toronto, waving colonial flags from high and low. Perhaps what is most important in this image is not what is present but what is absent. Without a single non-white face in this painting, the onlooker gets an idea of the scenes Biehn *did* celebrate and ennoble.

Although the only primary material related to Joseph Biehn's *Portrait of An Elderly Black Man (Alfred Butler?)* is an anonymous newspaper article glued to its backside, one can discern much from Biehn's painting. Although Alfred Butler was relatively successful in his profession as a newsvendor, it was impossible for him to achieve acceptance and equality in Canadian society. His dress communicates his being for others – his definition of self against his white colonizers,

as does the antagonisms in his appearance such as his misplaced glasses. Far from empowering, Joshua Biehn's portrait of Alfred Butler permanently shackles this image of a colonial subject.



Joshua Biehn. *Portrait of an Elderly Black Man (Alfred Butler?)* 1899.

painting : oil on paper ; on board ; 11.5 x 11.3 cm

[http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam\\_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayitem&lang=eng&rec\\_nbr=2946121&rec\\_nbr\\_list=2946121,3713338,1309508,3532589,792176,6355,3362748,191551,2961816,181031](http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayitem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=2946121&rec_nbr_list=2946121,3713338,1309508,3532589,792176,6355,3362748,191551,2961816,181031)



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Francesco Giusti. *'Bonga Bonga'* From the series *'Sapologie' Pointe Noir, Congo.* 2009.



Joshua Joseph Biehn. *48th Highlanders, King Street, Toronto, Jubilee Day, 22nd June, 1897*. Artnet.

[http://www.artnet.com/Artists/LotDetailPage.aspx?lot\\_id=4EDBCBEE1B566F68BBB77BCC35C487B7](http://www.artnet.com/Artists/LotDetailPage.aspx?lot_id=4EDBCBEE1B566F68BBB77BCC35C487B7)

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<sup>1</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952), 85.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 98.

<sup>3</sup> George Hendrick and Willene Hendrick, *Black Refugees in Canada: Accounts of Escape during the Era of Slavery* (London: McFarland, 2010), 10.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 17.

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