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An extended review of *Sal Capone: The Lamentable Tragedy of*, written by Omari Newton, directed by Diane Roberts

BY DANIEL MCNEIL

*The Wire* did not achieve many of the conventional markers of success for an American television series. It did not win any Emmys or Golden Globes, its viewing figures were low compared to other hits on the HBO network, like *The Sopranos*, and its creators repeatedly had to fight for the show to be recommissioned (Jonest). What may, on the surface, appear to be a failure has also been used to celebrate *The Wire* as one of the greatest achievements in television history—a gritty, authentic portrayal of carceration, corruption, and dysfunctional institutions in the post-industrial American city that refused to compromise its artistic integrity (Lander). At elite American universities such as Berkeley, Duke, and Harvard, social scientists have taught courses on *The Wire* in the hopes that it will help their largely upper-middle-class students put "faces and stories" to concepts such as poverty and urban deindustrialization (Bennett). According to Williams, Jelani Wilson, a Harvard professor who teaches "Urban Inequality and *The Wire*"; the HBO show is a more poignant and compelling portrayal of "the systemic urban inequality that constrains the lives of the urban poor" than that of any published study (ibid.).

In contrast to American academics who use *The Wire* to instruct their students about the lived experiences of citizens that they may otherwise ignore, African Canadian dramatist Omari Newton has used the show to illustrate characters who prefer American fictions to Canadian realities. In the second scene of Newton's *Sal Capone, The Lamentable Tragedy of*, Naomi, a 12-year-old African Canadian, asks her 18-year-old brother Freddy, aka the post; MC Sal, "Why on earth are you talking like an extra from *The Wire*? I need Freddy, my big brother, can we leave 'Sal Capone' in gangster fairy tale land?" As part of his response, Sal expresses
incredibly that his sister knows David Suzuki but not Martin Scorsese (Newton 20, 22). How can he be more interested in figures who have received awards and prominence for translating a playwright's treatment of a homosupercross-section of Canadians than filmmakers who have translated the intersection of wealth, criminality and ambition amongst ethnic Americans with such artistry and flare? The exchange between Naomi and Sal is one of many conversations in Sal Capone that demonstrate the poly-consciousness of African Canadians, who find themselves squeezed between a desire for recognition from the Canadian establishment and a search for Black authenticity that is often dominated by the freedom dreams of African Americans (Hudson). Yet in researching this reflective piece about Sal Capone, I did not find any reviews of its brief run at the National Arts Centre that explored its relationship to the history of Black theatre in Canada. Nor did I discover any reviews that placed African Canadian identities in conversation with Black diasporic thinkers, such as Frantz Fanon, who have diagnosed the sickness of societies that fail to develop a coherent notion of a Black adult. I found, instead, reviews that read Sal Capone as a Canadian version of The Wire—reviews that asked how the play would translate the rage, violence, and creativity of racialized and marginalized individuals in Canada for a predominantly white, middle-class, Canadian audience. In addition to my brief reflections on the play, I thus put down some preliminary markers to explore the tendency to reduce Sal Capone and other explorations of Black being in "sociological plotting subsumed within the paternalistichold of the Canadian nation" (Hudson and Kamugisha).

**SAL CAPONE AND BLACK CANADIAN THOUGHT**

The stage directions for Sal Capone explicitly announce the play's interest in the politics and poetry of authenticity by setting the action in "Real City... a hybrid of Downtown Montreal and Vancouver's infamous downtown East Side" (Newton 2). Then announce the band Canadian sounds that threaten to confine and define the character of the hip-hop crew Sal Capone: "the most talk radio to honor. Talk of the hockey team, local politics and celebrity news. A dash, pulsating Hip Hop beat fades in" (Newton 3). The play proceeds to ask whether the hip-hop crew named "Sal Capone" will fade in to become another part of the sports-politics-social media complex. Will they follow the wishes of their manager and "sell out" to get radio play? Alternatively, will they respond to the police shooting of Sam, their award-winning HI, to critique state brutality and the "unacceptable face of capitalism" in an underground concert? Such a brief synopsis suggests the dimensions of the play that feel like they are set in the 1980s or early 90s—a time in which rappers released records proclaiming, "hate the police," and found it difficult to get their messages heard on mainstream radio. It is not clear how such dramatic devices resonated in our contemporary moment, when the living members of NWA produce Straight Outta Compton (dir. F. Gary Gray, 2015), a commercial film that made over US $200 million at the box office, and recording artists talk more about their battles to receive royalties from Spotify and other streaming services than their struggles to feature on radio playlists. The play's treatment of homosupercross-section of Canadians also feels somewhat anachronistic in an age in which Anabela Banks, Janelle Monte, and Frank Ocean are just a few of the artists to have disrupted heteronormative conventions on their paths to fame and success. In short, Sal Capone does not demand that its audiences are familiar with the latest developments in a North American hip-hop scene that has incorporated diversity and inclusion—not to mention Toronto and the 6ix—withins its arsenal of marketing strategies.

It may be productive—morally as well as politically—to consider the play as another example of how Black Canadians push for inclusion amongst those protected by the state. Consider, for example, Sam's lament that the killing of their friend did not receive national attention ("Nothing on CBC. Not a god damn word") [Newton 54]. Newman is an incisive analyst of the expectation that more vocal, assertive, "American" performances are required to fight back against Canadian indifference, and describes the character of Shawney as an Indigenous, transsexual woman who adopts the "armor" of a female, African American sex worker when she speaks directly to the audience (ibid. 2). Sal Capone is also able to dramatize the world-weightiness of people of colour in Canada who recognize that when they are given media attention, there is a tendency to flay their stories with caricatures borrowed from Netflix and Hollywood. Sal Capone is a Papua New Guinea man who is a fierce MC and best friends with Sal and Sam, mock local news sources who present the offence of Sam's recreational drug use as if he was "Tiju Chapec" (ibid. 54). Spooler alert: the play ends with Sal's younger sister Naomi alienated from the assumption that Canadians should demonstrate deference to the police and other public institutions. The killing of Shawney mythifies softly by proclaiming, "fuck the police," in a "cold and unemotional" manner (ibid. 99). Then Sal Capone's "Cop Killing" song starts to play, and we fade to black.

**SAL CAPONE AND WHITE CANADIAN CRITICS**

The responses to Sal Capone in the Ottawa media were rather predictable to readers familiar with stereotypes that associate Blackness with irrationality, rhythm, extremism, openness with nature, sexuality, and so on. One felt the ghost of the famous Senegalese poet and politician Leopold Senghor pronouncing, "L'émotion est notre corne la raison helène" (Senghor 24), when one read reviews that praised the play as "passionate," "compelling," and "insanitizing" (fahbog) in a manner that evoked the fans of The Wire who believed that African American actors from drama schools in London and New York were authentic characters from the streets of Baltimore (Jones). Other reviews criticized the "anger," "rough, raw poetry," and "cacophony of souls" that made it difficult for them to comprehend the performance (Perelman), evoking the practice of suburban viewers who turned on the subtitles to decipher the African American vernacular English in The Wire because they felt it needed to be made more intelligible (Akbar). In short, reviewers yearned Sal Capone as a window into the hurt, pain, and rage of Blacks in Canadian cities in the context of a Black Lives Matter movement. They were not surprised to read the reactions of the play after the killing of Freddy Villanueva, an 18-year-old Honduran-Canadian youth shot by the police in Montreal, and alluded to Justin Trudeau's Aboriginal community meeting in Ottawa where the Prime Minister met with Indigenous leaders who called for a national inquiry into police brutality. They did not interpret Sal Capone as an artistic creation that dramatized the ability of young people of African descent to analyze and theorize the violence and terror of modern society.

Amidst celebratory reviews that savoured the emotional intensity of the performance, as well as critical commentary that expressed frustration with the play's structure and sound design, Patrick Langston's review for Artsmiles was worth quoting at length for its attempt to address the difficulty of communicating the brashness of hip-hop to an audience that, in the critic's view, may be more familiar with the worlds of jazz and classical music. Clocking in at just under 50 minutes, the finely wrought show is loud, violent and immersive. Like the hip-hop that underpins it, it's more rhythm than Melodic. And, being hip-hop, it is littered with the N-word and other language that never seems to lose its ability to make white, middle-class audiences like us cringe.

It is, in other words, the story of people marginalized by power structures that try to cut off every attempt by those people to express themselves and claim a bit of what the rest of us enjoy.

Langston's daring to address the ethics of translating a hip-hop culture with roots in Black and Brown working-class communities may be productive in the fight against white supremacy; his blunt emphasis on a white, middle-class "us," which presumes that the audience shares his racial and class position, may simply be reflective of white normativity. The focus on a white middle-class audience not only overlooks members of a Black middle-class who may cringe at the excess but also confers on us the privilege of a claim to Black authenticity is invested into forms of hip-hop that are in practice and sentiment Black culture (Gordon). It also omits to mention social identities such as age, which may be more pertinent to the struggles of some middle-aged or elderly members of the audience as they decode the story of a multiracial group of teenagers involved in the hip-hop group Sal Capone.

**SAL CAPONE AND FRANTZ FANON**

The politics and poetics of Frantz Fanon—a Caribbean psychiatrist, philosopher, and revolutionary who fought for France during the Second World War and the Algerian resistance against French colonization—continue to inspire people around the world to confront the shame and pain of racial hierarchy and neocolonialism. Many scholars and practitioners are drawn to a thinker who succinctly acknowledges the abjectness of race
"I am conscious of the circumstances that art and culture must face in order to be leveraged as new harmonious race relations".

SAL CAPONE AND ME

In the interval, before the performance of Sal Capone, I did not expect to see any contexts with the terms of middle age and the fact that I will turn 40 to Sal Capone, but in the end the texts do not discount forever. I feel somewhat distanced from contemporary hip-hop, and I feel a certain sense of mourning for the communal politics and publics of hip-hop's golden era (Capone, artist-in-residence and community engagement coordinator for NAC English Theatre) anticipated many of my concerns. One striking question posed to me by the performers was how it dealt with the escalation of a gathering into something the police would then call a riot. Another asked for our thoughts on the use and abuse of the terms "fully" and "profane" and "right" as well as our reflections on forms of non-violent protest. We were, therefore, able to carve out the theatrical and political space to discuss fanon. We noted that Fanon's text was a case of political force but knew that it was pointless to privilege non-violent commitments when any attempt to challenge presumptive legitimacy of colonial system is a form of violence. He knew that the mission of his generation was to propose a form of Black consciousness that inspired people from this Africa, to join together in the Caribbean to stabilize new forms of belonging with time, space and each other. He did not waste time trying to figure out ways to contain, manage, and accommodate those forces and surprise the power of diversity, with particular attention given to the idea of".

What was to be done in a conflict that has failed to develop a coherent and nuanced notion of a Black subject? In a world in which all Blacks are "always-already-another... [where] each and every Black subject is marked by all other Blacks" (Keeling 92). Fanon did not present that Black liberation should be limited to the pettybourgeoisie desire to erect wall between the black and the white subject but that there are those who strive for assimilation into a system that affirmed whites the luxury of modernity. While contesting the understandable understandings of the Black subject, he returned to some of the themes of his earlier work: the struggle for social justice. Fanon also noted that such emergences conform to a hebdomal cycle and are anticipated by colonial modes of representation that underscore that image and anger to be essential characteristics of blackness (Keeling 150-156). In Black Skin, White Mask, Fanon proposed that we must wait. We needed to be patient to identify the possibility of and to develop a productive perspective on the struggle for the liberation of the Black community and to consider members of the public in order to lead the protesters to their war with us and to recognize the power of the community as a whole to resist the assault on our humanity. I am conscious of the assumptions that art and commerce that prominently featured racialized and ethnic minorities tools are ready to leverage and advance more harmonious race relations, as the Toronto Metro Police Services Board at Youth Issues Forum offered screenings of Boys of the Hood. (John Singleton), in the hopes that it would help alleviate some of the anger and rage directed from the Black community to the police. I have visited Library and Archives Canada to read the proceedings of a symposium designed to "strengthen the dialogue between Police, Aboriginal/Visible Minority Communities and the public," which was held a few days after the Yonge Street uprising in May 1992. I am aware that such events tend to centre their agenda on Black role models, family structure and drug culture rather than invite discussion about state brutality, militarism and terrorism. I have become accustomed to a liberal tradition in Canada that considers the creation of "new cadre of community leaders who are familiar with Canadian institutions and practices" to be one measure of multiculturalism's success (Krywulak 12-13).

The questions generated by von Brunn, Diane Roberts (the director of the project of black poet and community engagement coordinator for NAC English Theatre) anticipated many of my concerns. One striking question posed to me by the performers was how it dealt with the escalation of a gathering into something the police would then call a riot. Another asked for our thoughts on the use and abuse of the terms "fully" and "profane" and "right" as well as our reflections on forms of non-violent protest. We were, therefore, able to carve out the theatrical and political space to discuss fanon. We noted that Fanon's text was a case of political force but knew that it was pointless to privilege non-violent commitments when any attempt to challenge presumptive legitimacy of colonial system is a form of violence. He knew that the mission of his generation was to propose a form of Black consciousness that inspired people from this Africa, to join together in the Caribbean to stabilize new forms of belonging with time, space and each other.

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