



Citation: Kleinberg, R., (2026). The Sir George Williams University Protests as Embodied Politics of Traversal of the Fantasy. *Aisthesis* 21(5): 71-88. doi: 10.7413/2035-8466080

Copyright: © 2026 – The Author(s). This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY-4.0).

The Sir George Williams University Protests as Embodied Politics of Traversal of the Fantasy

REID KLEINBERG

University of Essex

reidklein24@gmail.com

Abstract. The Sir George Williams University protests occurred in Montreal, Canada between January-February 1969. The uprising was one flashpoint in a networked anti-colonial revolt comprising Quebec nationalist, Black Power, and pan-Caribbean elements. But were the acts of choreographed and impromptu solidarity performed during the protest enough to break through ideological partisanship and emotionally embedded identifications to produce a multi-racial left-wing bloc? The answer to this question is pressing for contemporary political theory debates over the models and capabilities of transnational left-wing politics. This paper draws on archival research to read the protests for their embodied political practices that sustained a cross-identification coalition. The paper turns to psychoanalytic political theory to explain how the political logic articulated by the protests is characterized as a ‘traversal of fantasy’. In this final sense, the paper aims to develop case-analysis of how the political practices of traversal of the fantasy enable cross-ideological left-wing coalitions.

Keywords. Sir George Williams University, Black Power, Quebec, left-populism, transnationalism, traversal of the fantasy.

1. *Introduction*

In Montreal, Canada on January 29th, 1969, a coalition of Caribbean, Black Canadian, and Quebecois students began an occupation of the computer center of Sir George Williams University (SGW) (Eber [1969]: 27-30; Shum [2015]: 262). The core issue was maltreatment at SGW, a microcosm of the hostility and racism Black and Caribbean people experienced in Montreal (Austin [2013]: 135). Among the protesting students were future leaders of Canadian and Caribbean society. Together, they challenged university administration to guarantee the rights and respect deserved.

The SGW protests featured in a procession of direct actions, intellectual exchanges, and political uprisings that I call «The Long Montreal Revolt»¹ (LMR) (Kleinberg [2025]). Between 1963-1976, a transnational network of activist and militant groups emerged across Britain, Canada, the Caribbean and the United States. The network intertwined and united the Quebec sovereignty, Black Power, and Caribbean anti-colonial movements and presented a transnational challenge to the post-colonial liberalism and hegemony of North Atlantic states (Austin [2013]; Fournier [1984]; Mills [2010]). While a fundamentally fluid and porous political phenomenon, the Long Montreal Revolt provides a name to index how the granular and intimate connections between people, groups, events, and geographies gave shape to a novel anti-colonial identification². Presenting more than a strategic or pragmatic calculus of mutual interests and aims, the actors in the LMR entangled ideas, ideologies, bodies, communal spaces, and political movements across race, geography, and national identity. Together they consolidated a network and an identification defined by solidarity in anti-colonial struggle.

This paper engages with the Sir George Williams University Protests as a key event in the LMR to intervene in contemporary political theory debates over the future of transnational left-wing politics (Kamola, Calkivik [2024]). The global populist moment of the 2010's has rescinded (Venizelos, Stavrakakis [2022]) and left-wing and transformative politics needs new inspiration. Discourse Theory, the intellectual force behind the 2010's left-populist surge (Mouffe [2018])" remains a productive philosophy for grounding left-wing politics.

Left-populism must attune to a post-foundational and cosmopolitan account of radical democratic theory as a guiding horizon (Kleinberg [2023]). Unfortunately, initial writings on transnational left-populism have so far remained largely introductory, conceptual and limited to Western Europe (Moffitt [2017];

1 LMR captures the transnationalism and ideological diversity of this North Atlantic movement compared to the archetypal term for Quebecois politics in the 1960s, the "Quiet Revolution".

2 Montreal provided a gravitational center to the network's orbit and is a convenient lens for analyzing the case but should not be understood as the unilateral geographic determinant of the movement.

Panayotu [2021]). Developing a more situated understanding of left-wing transnationalism is vital.

The LMR is productive for reanimating left-wing transnationalism because the historical record and political-theoretical accounting of the LMR are underdeveloped and underappreciated. As David Austin ([2013]: 130) notes about the SGW protests, they are remembered as a «moment of academic racism in the form of a professor who deliberately failed Black students, and a university administration that turned its backs on the students that filed the complaint against the professor», rather than as an element of a transnational movement that gathered and aligned diverse identities. Indeed, radical political theory has often overlooked the transnational connection between the Black Power, Caribbean, and Quebecois movements of the 1960s (Di Donato, Fulla [2023]). These histories are typically considered as geographically and ideologically isolated (e.g. Slate [2012]). Likewise, populism studies is guilty of paying almost no attention to the Black Atlantic and the Black Radical Tradition (Eklundh, Tavares Furtado [2022]), despite innovative steps by Black Radical Tradition scholars to adopt Discourse Theoretical concepts (Dawson [2013]) politics, and civil society. African Americans have been in the vanguard of progressive social movements throughout American history, but they have been written out of many histories of social liberalism. Focusing on the 1920s and 1930s, as well as the Black Power movement, Dawson examines successive failures of socialists and Marxists to enlist sympathetic blacks, and white leftists' refusal to fight for the cause of racial equality. Angered by the often outright hostility of the Socialist Party and similar social democratic organizations, black leftists separated themselves from these groups and either turned to the hard left or stayed independent. A generation later, the same phenomenon helped fueled the Black Power movement's turn toward a variety of black nationalist, Maoist, and other radical political groups. The 2008 election of Barack Obama notwithstanding, many African Americans still believe they will not realize the fruits of American prosperity any time soon. This pervasive discontent, Dawson suggests, must be mobilized within the black community into active opposition to the social and economic status quo. Black politics needs to find its way back to its radical roots as a vital component of new American progressive movements. The most productive scholarship on the LMR therefore has come from Black Studies scholars researching across the North Atlantic (Austin [2013]; Mills [2010]; Gowland [2022]).

To advance the theory and strategy of left-populism, this article revisits the SGW protests to identify political practices that enable psychodynamics of multidimensional political identification. The article draws on archival research conducted at McGill University, the University of Quebec at Montreal, and Concordia University Special Collections. The article makes three productive claims: (a) The SGW protests exemplify the political logic (Glynos, Howarth [2007]:

143) of «traversal of the fantasy», a significant process identified by psychoanalytic theory that prefigures novel political identifications. Traversal of the fantasy relaxes and “opens” subject’s static identifications – like party affiliation, nationality, or racialized identity – to the fundamental contingency of identity (Žižek [2002]: 19-21). Expositing the traversal of the fantasy as the overarching political logic emanating from the SWG protests is instructive for thinking about how to coordinate transnational, multi-racial, and cross-ideological left-coalitions in the contemporary moment. (b) The SGW protests provide a repertoire of interpersonal organizational practices, such as sit-ins, protest ensembles, and bodily acts of civil disobedience that are productive for orchestrating a politics of traversal of the fantasy. As a repertoire, these practices translate traversal of fantasy from a complex, descriptive theory into an embodied component of populist strategy. (c) Despite the complicated legacy and ultimate defeat of the LMR, the SGW protests offer an inspiring political horizon (or cultural discourse) important for instructing future politics. The works of media, such as films, plays, and documentaries memorializing the SGW protests present a «counter-logic» (Glynos, Howarth [2007]: 194) a lucid discourse where the protean realities of the movement become consolidated as a touchstone with which to orient future left-populisms.

2. The political theory of identifications: discourse theory and traversing the fantasy

For political theorists of radical and transformative politics, the question of movement unity and identification is crucial (Laclau [2005]; Dean [2016]; Mouffe [2018]). In the mid-20th century, radical political theory struggled with the prospect that Communist revolution had been impeded by the dual workings of state repression and a late-capitalist monoculture. Discourse Theory is a significant innovation in this tradition, emerging as a «post-Marxist» (Laclau, Mouffe [1985]) effort to theorize the semiotic, affective, and practice-based dimensions of political ontology in response to the transformations brought about by the long 1960s and the rise of new social movements in the early 1980s (Laclau, Mouffe [1985]; Glynos, Howarth [2007]; De Cleen et al. [2024]). Discourse Theory illuminates how social and political practices create emotional relationships between actors, identities, and organizations, an aspect that is crucial for understanding the stability of political coalitions (Laclau, Mouffe [1985]: 99). This analysis is predicated on the post-foundationalist and post-structuralist thesis that no social-semiotic structure or institution is naturally fixed. Rather, all identity is discursively mediated and all identifications must be politically and ontologically articulated (Laclau, Mouffe [1985]: 121; Glynos, Howarth [2007]: 109). The task of radical actors, or movements, becomes to connect varying

practices and symbols in the discursive field in emotionally galvanizing and relatable ways such that novel and potent assemblages form that contest and assert themselves on the status quo. The social meaning of these assemblages are never pre-given but become retroactively mediated and identifiable through discursive articulations (Laclau [2005]: 111). Therefore, while social, cultural, and political institutions provide semi-stable contexts for communication and meaning, their codes, rules, and practices are all ontologically contingent as the operations of articulation and hegemony engrain and maintain a discursive regime.

As Discourse Theory has matured, the theorization of the individual subject's envelopment in the discursive world has progressed through Lacanian psychoanalysis and the concepts of desire, fantasy, ideology, and identification (Stavrakakis [2007]; Glynos, Howarth [2007]; Glynos [2011]). Building on this turn to Lacan, Discourse Theory has further deepened its critical stance toward stable or essential identities, theorizing instead how the Lacanian "split-subject" engages in *identification* through the psychodynamic concepts of desire and fantasy (Stavrakakis [2007]: 69-71). All subjective identifications are structured through (ideological) discourses, that while never completely fixed, envelop and orient the way the subject receives *jouissance* (enjoyment) by investing in and pursuing the discourse's fantasmatic objects of desire (Glynos [2001]; Glynos, Howarth [2007]: 155). That is, in traditional Lacanian psychoanalysis desire is always desire for the *objet petit a*, the positivization of the subject's ontological lack in both identity and fulfillment (often metaphorized in the scene of the child's separation from the mother) (Glynos [2001]: 201). Discursive fantasies orient and structure the trajectory of the subject's desire and pursuit of this fulfillment, naming, and assigning in socio-symbolic terms, the "content" of objects of *jouissance* (the Lacanian *partial objet*) (Stavrakakis [2007]: 75-77).

Subsequently, ideology names the "grip" or "pull" that sustains the identification; the fantasy structure's complex emotional economy and promise of enjoyment-to-come as the subject pursues desired objects keeps the subject enthralled and stabilized in their identification (Glynos [2001]: 208). For example, nationalism is one such identification where the grip of fantasy is particularly strong (Kleinberg [2023]). The content defining or describing the nation's fulfillment changes over time – the national drama may shift from ethnic, linguistic, cultural, or historical criteria (Žižek [1993]: 213). What remains consistent, however, is the emotional force of the belief and commitment in the fulfillment of the mysterious thing represented by "the nation". In Žižek's analysis ([1993]: 203) this is because in nationalist (or national) identifications, "the nation" occupies the center of the fantasy, filling in the *objet petit a* and giving direction to desire. Fantasy provides identification with extreme staying power allowing them to remain resilient despite internal and external "shocks".

If identifications are resilient to change because of the grip of fantasies, what hope is there for forming coalitions *across* identifications? Discourse Theory's psychoanalytic tool kit provides one answer with the concept of traversal of the fantasy. Traversal of the fantasy was originally theorized by Lacan in clinical practice as the end stage of analysis, when the subject comes to recognize the contingency of their identification and learns to take *responsibility* for their fantasies (Žižek [2002]: 21). It is a subjective practice of critical self-reflection; of identifying one's relationship to fantasy and how the *jouissance* organized by the fantasy is a potent feature of one's life (Žižek [2002]: 22). Equally significant, a traversal of the fantasy calls for the subject to identify with the "Other" that is understood to block their fantasy – the group or entity the fantasy structures as the obstacle to *jouissance*. Žižek ([2002]: 91-95) explains this as a direct confrontation with our obscene imagination about the Other. One must come to terms with the structural role the "intrusive" "useless" or "evil" Other plays in the organization of our fantasy and *jouissance*. From this confrontation, we loosen our dependence on antagonism with the Other for our *jouissance* and form a solidarity with the Other reconciled with how they really are (Žižek [1993]: 214). We come to accept *both* the fundamental contingency of our identifications and to accept the role of *jouissance* in fantasy as the condition of a stable existence in reality; moreover with a mature understanding of the productive role of the Other (Žižek [2009]: 40) electronically inspired phantasms that cloud the ability to reason and prevent a true understanding of a world increasingly dominated by abstractions – whether those of digital technology or the speculative market. Into this arena, enters Žižek: equipped with an agile wit and the skills of a prodigious scholar, he confidently ranges among a dazzling array of cultural references – explicating Robert Schumann as deftly as he does John Carpenter – to demonstrate how the modern condition blinds us to the ideological basis of our lives.

The article maps and characterizes the practices that comprised the political logic of traversal of the fantasy articulated by the SGW protests (and the wider LMR). Political logic is an analytic concept utilized in Discourse Theory to illuminate how actors and movements exert agency, on an ontological level, describing the *quality* of political phenomena's assertion, contestation, or stabilization of power and hegemony (Laclau [2005]: 117; Glynos and Howarth [2007]: 143). Assessing the orchestration and articulation of a political logic requires characterizing the constitutive discursive practices through which actors assemble the symbols, bodies, material, social rituals, and affect of their campaigns. The political logic of traversal of a fantasy best depicts how the SGW protests transcended the emotionally-invested identifications of the individual factions that comprised the protest collective.

The article characterizes the practices of the SGW protestors as documented in archival sources and primary and secondary literature. Theoretically, the article attempts to “breakdown” and translate traversal of the fantasy – an admittedly complex and descriptive concept – into practices by drawing from Jodi Dean’s (2016) theorization of the contingent collective identity generated during crowds. Dean’s account of “crowd politics” – participation in protest assemblies, occupations, marches etc., offers an approximate demonstration of the embodied dimension of traversal of the fantasy. For example, Dean ([2016]: 58) describes how partaking in protest crowds renders a «political subjectivation [that] involves forcing this non-identity, making it felt» by the ensemble. Similarly, the SGW activists engaged their bodies in the heat of the protest, animating the years of prefigurative networking, critical study, and solidarity that permeated the LMR. This corporal articulation cultivated a reflexive psychological process of mutual recognition that allowed individual participants to identify with the role of “the other” in their own fantasy for political hegemony, the co-participant of another faction.

Two sets of bodily practices emerge from the SGW protest that help characterize a generalizable account of the political logic of traversal of the fantasy. First, bodily engagement naturalized and inculcated a shared political consciousness that was previously dormant, absent, or speculative. Second, intentional actions that threw bodies into kinetic or risky situations strengthened and fortified the social meaning of the protest as collective and anti-racist. The next section briefly describes the background of the Long Montreal Revolt and the Sir George Williams University protests before analyzing these practices.

3. The Sir George Williams Protests: networked revolt and practicing traversal of the fantasy

Montreal, Canada in French speaking Quebec province is both cosmopolitan and unique. Its geographical proximity to the United States’ northern border allows the easy exchange of American ideas while Canada’s place in the UK commonwealth has enabled post-colonial migration from the Caribbean (Forsythe [1971]: 50-55). The robust history of French settlement, and then domination by England, created a complex nationalism in the province. In the early 1960’s Quebec nationalism, long dormant, re-emerged in revolutionary form alongside the appearance of a newly (acknowledged) Black Power (Fournier [1984]; Austin [2013]).

Radical organizations like the *Rassemblement pour l'Indépendance Nationale* (RIN) called for territorial independence, an end to foreign (American) economic extraction, and the legal protection of the French language. Militant organizations, like the *Front de libération du Québec* (FLQ), operated clandestinely; partisans would drift between membership in legal, public-facing groups and extra-legal paramilitary groups (Fournier [1984]: 128). Intellectuals like Pierre Vallières and Charles Gagnon were the literary voice of this movement, providing a discourse for militants in the FLQ like Mario Bachand to express a mélange of Quebecois nationalism and Third Worldist anti-colonialism (Fournier [1984]: 171; Austin [2013]: 93). At the same time, Black political activism, organic in Canada since the slave trade, was strengthened in post-war demands for rights and equality (Austin [2013]: 72-73). Canadian Black Power politics surged with the civil rights and militant struggles happening in the United States and the influx of the Caribbean diaspora.

Sir George Williams University (SGW), now Concordia University, was housed in the Henry F. Hall Building in Downtown Montreal. By the late 1960s, SGW hosted a formidable clique of talented and politicized Caribbean students who would become future political and community leaders in both Canadian and Caribbean society (Austin [2013]: 59). For example, Anne Cools the future Canadian senator from Barbados, Joey Jagan the son of Guyana's President Cheddi Jagan, Rosie Douglass future Prime Minister of Dominica, Saint Vincent's Alfie Roberts and the Antiguan opposition leader Tim Hector, to name just a few, all studied or worked in Montreal during this period (Austin [2018]: 7-10). White Montreal student life was also inundated with left-wing political currents. In addition to the well documented flow of students into the RIN and the FLQ (Fournier [1984]: 124) McGill University archival records (MG 4319-01-018) document a wide spectrum of clubs, socials, protests, campus speakers, and lampooning commentaries from opposition to the Vietnam War, to Marxist-Leninist and Maoist parties.

The rise in the SGW student activists' identification with political discourses such as Caribbean anti-colonialism, Black Power, and Quebec nationalism is best exemplified by noting the series of conferences on these topics in the year preceding the protest.

In October 1968, Montreal hosted the Black Writers Congress (Austin [2018]) a global event bringing together Black Panthers, Caribbean intellectuals, Canadian Black Power activists, and leaders of the Front de Libération du Québec (FLQ) (Forsythe [1971]: 63). At the Conference, Clarence Bayne, a professor at SGW and co-founder of the Montreal-based National Black Coalition of Canada, simultaneously captured the affective power of Black Power identification and its potential for driving factionalism, declaring, «We have a common humanity and a basic desire for freedom. However, Black people can-

not talk to white people until we have found our identity, until we have discovered where we want to go» (see also Austin [2018]: 14-15). In November 1968, the city hosted a major anti-Vietnam War conference marked by further meetings between the FLQ and the Black Panthers (Bloom, Martin [2016]: 268; Austin [2013]: 132; Fournier [1984]: 141). In December 1968, Rockey Jones the preeminent Black anglophone activist, organized a follow-up to the Black Writers Conference to focus on the specifics of Black Power in Canada in his home city of Halifax, Nova Scotia (Forsythe [1971]: 68). Many of the Caribbean leaders of the SGW protests, such as Philippe Fis-Aime and Rosie Douglass, attended some or all of these events (Eber [1969]: 53). Even the week of the SGW protests' culmination (February 11th, 1969) was capped by one of the most notorious FLQ bombings: the Montreal Stock Exchange on February 13th (Eber [1969]: 13). At the apex of heightened passions – with factions intently identifying with political-discourses like Quebecois nationalism, Black Power, and Caribbean anti-colonialism – a cross-racial and cross-ideological protest movement emerged.

In the spring of 1968, Black and Caribbean students collectively reported unfair treatment and racism by biology professor Perry Anderson to University officials³. The grievance bubbled over into the summer and the fall, as administrators began an investigation and clashed with the students over the procedure of the inquiry. After months of frustration, on January 29th of 1969, the students disrupted a faculty meeting on the case and led a sit-in and occupation of the University's computer center on the ninth floor of the Hall Building. Despite different origins, background pressures, identifications, and desires, the preceding years of LMR networking, activism, and exchange created prefigurative conditions for activists to orchestrate a multiracial and cross-ideological occupation. The protestors eventually arrested and criminally charged; Eber ([1969]: 7) places the figure as «forty-nine white, forty-one black, sixty male and thirty female... forty-four are Canadian and forty-six are foreigners» (Eber [1969]: 11).

4. Practicing bodily risk: kinesthesia, opening the gap in identity, and fantasizing with the other

On January 22nd, 1969, a few days before the occupation of the computer center began, two students broke into the University Vice-Principal's office to demand an apology for a letter he had written about Black and Caribbean

3 A cogent and impassioned explanation of the student's grievances can be found in a speech by student leader Kelvin Robinson. See Eber [1969]: 112.

students' capacity for violence. The pair sequestered the Vice-Principal until he drafted an apology; making such an impression that he filed kidnapping charges (Eber [1969]: 84-85). Such disobedient behavior, asserting control over and transgressing the predictable norms and hierarchies of the racialized academic space exemplifies the "risk taking" practices of the coalition's protest choreography. Physical confrontation, putting the body in shared situations of potential harm and provocation, had the effect of breaking down the participants' individual identifications with political discourses. Dean ([2016]: 107) attests to the effect of collective physical transgression in breaking down individual identification in her study of crowds. She explains how the collective "risky" kinesthesia creates an «exhilarating moment when a sense of individuality is obliterated as all the mediators of social interchange that maintain our separateness give way...» Moreover, as Foster ([2003]: 410) helpfully notes, the potency of physical disobedience does not stem from some quasi-spiritual property of the body – the body itself is not a direct channel for interfacing with identification – but the prolonged, repetitive experience of practice cultivates psychological reflection and openness. The more repetitive the practice, the more sustained the effect.

Amongst the first wave of protestors to ascend to the ninth floor to occupy the computer center was McGill University Professor Stanley Gray⁴ (Eber [1969]: 94). To underscore how big of a step Gray was taking in the hybridization and breakdown of ideological barriers between movements, consider that only a month after SGW, on March 28th, Gray would convene, in partnership with the FLQ's Mario Bachand, one of the largest student protests in Quebec history, Operation McGill Francais. McGill Francais demanded the creation of additional (there were only two at the time) French-language universities and French-language autonomy in Quebec. The protest brought together 15,000 student demonstrators with 65,000 striking members of the *Conseil central des syndicats nationaux de Montreal* (CSN) labor union (Fournier [1984]: 153-54). For a committed Quebecois militant like Gray, so invested in the project of Quebec autonomy and especially *French-language* education, to put his body on the line in an occupation centered on the Black, immigrant, and predominantly *anglophone* student experience is a tremendous showing of solidarity that cuts across the immediacy of ideological identification.

CSN members were also some of the rowdiest participants in the SGW protests. In the thick of the occupation, CSN members occupied the streets outside the Hall building, physically confronting racist hecklers in the crowd

4 Gray was a leader in the Quebec nationalist and labor movements and would later lead the FLQ aligned group the *Front de liberation Populaire* (Fournier [1984]: 156).

and amplifying the corporeal presence of the occupation (Mills [2010]: 167-68). The riskiness and provocativeness of the CSN's and the white Quebecois labor movement's willingness to be confrontational, and even violent, in support of the SGW protests cannot be understated. This was, after all, a time in Montreal that, due to the ongoing attacks of the FLQ, paranoia about terrorism and armed cells was high. The CSN under the leadership of Michel Chartrand had adopted a Marxist discourse and militant union tactics, drawing even greater public scrutiny (Mills [2010]: 164-165). Indeed, after the FLQ's bombing of the Montreal Stock Exchange on February 13th, Chartrand issued a fiery rebuttal to moral condemnations of the Quebec autonomy movement's use of violence (Fournier [1984]: 151). The shared confrontation seemed to have the effect of loosening the strict contours of the individual movements, interweaving their struggles and opening doors to not just future organizing, but the symbolic identity and meaning of the movements.

The CSN would continue to take to the streets to support the SGW protestors following the uprising, issuing press releases, demonstrating publicly, and contributing financially to the students' legal defense (Mills [2010]: 168). For example, Fournier ([1984]: 154; *my italics*) describes how a month later, in retaliation for the police harassment of McGill Francais participants, «A commando group of students and taxi drivers launched a lightning counterattack with Molotov cocktails against the *McGill computer centre* and several targets in Westmount». The choice of targets, the McGill computer centre – a clear reference to the SGW protests – points to the collective hybridization of the network. We should read this kinetic action (and its symbolic reference to SGW) as characterizing the traversal of the fantasy. The Quebec nationalists identified with the fight of the Black and Caribbean “others”. The Black and Caribbean struggle for rights and recognition in Quebec, inherently alien if not an obstacle to the Quebec nationalist fantasy of autonomy, had been reconfigured into a fluid discourse of anti-colonialism and a space for new identifications. Similarly, during the trial of SGW protestors, many of the Black and Caribbean student defendants wore buttons and gave comments in support of McGill Francais while in court, illustrating a parallel act of «identifying with the other» (Eber [1969]: 271).

Finally, the embodiment of this «obliterated individuality» (Dean [2016]: 107) is well captured in a remarkable anecdote about the end of the SGW occupation. As the Montreal police breached the Hall building Eber ([1969]: 203) relates how «After breaking through the barricades they followed the students to the ninth floor. ... Constable Jean Legros asked if there was a leader he could talk to and he remembers that the occupiers all said together, “we’re all equal – there are no leaders”».

5. *Practicing Occupation: sit-ins and the collective openness of identification*

The occupation stage of the protest mainly transpired as a sit-in, a popular tactic of both the global civil rights and student movement of the period. The SGW protests, however, occurred in two stages, with the occupation only commencing after a passionate session of debate and deliberation. Foster ([2003]: 399) describes sit-ins as designed, «to block access or to insistently remind those in power of protestors' demands». This was certainly true, but the SGW sit-in also resembled an experiment in integrated, communal living. The occupants quickly developed autonomous practices and rhythms of living together. The prefiguring experiences of solidarity, the years of joint attendance at conferences, of reading groups, and socialization seemed to prepare the occupiers to act not just calmly, but strategically, choreographing the location of their racialized bodies in ways to heighten the communicative message of the protest and mitigate against violent responses.

On February 4th, five days after the protests began, the SGW affair had reached its boiling point. A mélange of 350 bodies mixed between students, community and international activists, faculty advisers, and journalist observers gathered in the mezzanine of the Hall building to debate the next course of action. The protests were on the cusp-of turning into an occupation. Powerful orations were delivered by the Black and Caribbean SGW student coalition. One of the original complainants against Professor Anderson, Kelvin Robinson, bellowed a challenge to the Canadian white student body to accept and live up to the moral universalism, of not just Western liberalism, but the 1960s radical spirit of emancipatory theory:

Remember, I didn't say it, but you said it. You said the Administration was incompetent. You said the Administration was bungling. What are you going to do about it? You're going to class, you're going to class. Business as usual. Go up into the cafeteria, play a whole set of cards, though nothing goin on. And then you want to come and tell the world, you are Canadian, and you're different from the Americans, and a man is a man's you don't care if he's colored, black, pink, green in blue, that's the song they always sing, I ain't got no prejudice against anybody, a man is a man. And now you have an opportunity here to show that a man is a man, and to show that despite the fact there's black people concerned, you're willing to fight on their side because their side is right, and what do you do?... (Eber [1969]: 119)

Rocky Jones, the prominent Canadian-born Black political activist had travelled from his home in Halifax to participate. In his speech, Jones continued Robinson's challenge to white masculinity, humanism, and willingness to act in the defense of ostensibly held beliefs in universalism and activism:

You see, I know that I am standing up here condemning white folks. You see most white folks are pansies. White men are pansies, because they won't even fight for white folks. They allow their own society to exploit their own people, and black people have become

the vanguard of the revolutionary movement to overthrow that whole thing that's exploiting everybody. You're pansies. (Eber [1969]: 126)

For the true believing radicals in the crowd, it was a challenge to act and correct the premise of their ideology – to be accountable to the universal struggle that militants such as those in the FLQ had expressed – to put their bodies on the line.

With the student speeches reaching an end, the second stage of the protest, the sit-in occupation commenced. The ensemble, spearheaded by Gray, rushed the stairs of the Hall building to the computer centre on the ninth floor to camp out, which they would do for the next week. While many of the main organizers of the protests, white and black, had activism experience or were members of thriving movements (for example Gray the FLQ-aligned nationalist and Fis-Aime the organizer of the Black Writers Conference), many of the white participants in the mass ensemble were unaffiliated and political novices galvanized to act by the circumstances and *through* their participation.

For example, a white student protestor, Richard Swift, explained he joined the occupation because he thought the university procedure demonstrated an authoritarian use of power even though he was generally skeptical of the racism charges against Anderson (Eber [1969]: 99). Explaining the composition of the occupiers, he stated plainly, «many among both the black and white students were simply issue-oriented – they agreed with the issue. They probably had vague liberal tendencies and became politicized as a result of their experiences» (100). Dennis Kay described his 'aspirations to be a communist' and the disparate political tendencies and sensibilities of the occupiers (190-192). Morris Lemire explained a «principled basis, a moral basis for the occupation. The students charged a professor with racism. There must have been something to the charge – the University was stalling. It looked as if the University was doing everything in its power to stall» (206). Continuing, Lemire celebrated a heightened political awareness learned from the occupation, «And we set a new base from which we can further the struggle against racism» (207). Finally, Mark Medicoff a left-wing but non-affiliated white student protestor described the politicizing effect of the protest in idealized if eloquent terms, «None of us ever had half as great an educational experience as the sit-in. I could read Malcom X and Stokely forever but I didn't understand until I touched the hand of a black man. It sounds kind of poetic, doesn't it?» (223).

Based on these accounts it seems that participating in the ensemble created a sustained opening in the occupiers' identifications. That is, simultaneously, the occupation destabilized individuals' political fantasies (a vague liberal sense of justice or a universal communism), loosening the bonds of their identification and heightening the possibility of a novel, collective identification (Dean [2016]: 58). At the same time, the practice of the occupation

encouraged individuals to recognize the legitimacy of their compatriots' political fantasies.

Subsequently, the occupiers developed routines and practices of life in sequence with this ethics of respect 'towards the other' in-line with a traversal of the fantasy. The computer center facility manager recalled the actions of the first group to entrench in the room, «they just sat down on the floor and talked» (Eber [1969]: 177). Alfie Roberts, a key activist, intellectual, and occupier closely mentored by CLR James later recalled how this counter-society,

confirmed for him James's views on the principle of self-organization. He recalled how the occupants had organized themselves in the computer centre, some doing security, others taking care of food, while still others monitored the computers to ensure they were kept in pristine working order... hundreds of people demonstrated in support of the students and, seemingly spontaneously, many of them lined up in front of the apartment of a supporter of the arrested occupiers so that they could make a contribution to a legal fund. (Austin [2013]: 142)

This sense of hybrid and mutual identification is certainly present in the speeches, writings, and reflections of the participants. Black protest participant LeRoi Butcher would include the Quebec autonomy struggle in a list of recent anti-colonial movements that were violently repressed. Sandwiched between descriptions of British intervention in Anguilla and Guyana, and Jamaica's militarization of its police, Butcher states, «Canada called out for law and order and instituted the War Measures Act to siffle the yearnings of a people for right to be masters in their own Quebec home»⁵ (Forsythe [1971]: 77). Professor Bayne perceived that the events were politicizing for both Black and White communities, «In the course of talking to black people, I find they are relating things that happened to them in the past and which they are now willing to bring out in the open... People are now willing to talk about these things» (Eber [1969]: 200). In the course of the occupation, partisans and political novices alike had achieved a prefigurative moment, a solidarity that sustained an openness in political identification.

6. Conclusion: media and reactivation, the sgw protests as cultural counter-logic

The LMR did not end in the abolition of racial capitalism and the nation-state system and bring forth an inter-regional socialist polity. The LMR was impeded

5 A reference to a popular Quebecois nationalist slogan «Maîtres chez nous», or masters of our own house.

by both the external forces of state policing and the internal dynamics of strategic and material limitations (Austin [2013]; Gowland [2022]). For the SGW activists, the protests culminated with a confrontation with riot police, a criminal trial, punitive immigration proceeding, and years of surveillance and counter-insurgency policing (Eber [1969]: 283-85; Forsythe [1971]: 98-102; Fournier [1984]: 119; Austin [2013]: 174; Kleinberg [2025]). Indeed, it was never guaranteed that the SGW protests would be celebrated as a landmark case of civil disobedience against racism in Canada, notwithstanding a landmark case in anti-colonial resistance (see Forsythe [1971]: 8-10). On March 31st, 1969 (a month after the protests), Dorothy Wills, on behalf of the civil rights organization the Canadian Conference Committee, would term the destruction of the computers and the violence inflicted on the students a “tragedy” and state the organization’s desire for a just and legal resolution to the conflict (F035-03-f57). In 1973, protest participant Kiven Tunteng ([1973]: 235) was cynical and pessimistic about the results, opining that the student activists had eroded their credibility with the Canadian public.

To fully appreciate and take inspiration from the political logic of traversal of the fantasy, and the constitutive practices, articulated by the SGW protests, the article proposes (re)interpretation and recounting of the events of SGW through the recent cultural and artistic forms (film, theatre, audio, poetry) that memorialize the event. Approached through Discourse Theory, these media discursive add a productive texture that retroactively (re)articulates and consolidates the political logic of the protest. Moreover, considering that the memory of radical political movements are always threatened by revisionism, assimilation, and strategic forgetting mediated by state counter-discourses (Kamola, Calkivik [2024]; Kleinberg [2025]) the social meaning and lessons produced from engaging the LMR must be (re)animated. Thus, engaging the political logic of the protest through these media works allows us, «to reactivate and make evident options that were foreclosed during the emergence of a practice... in order to show how the present configuration of practices relies on exclusions and to reveal the non-necessary character of the present social formation» (Glynos, Howarth [2007]: 155).

Media portrayals of the SGW protests capture and express the utopian potential latent in the moment. These works consolidate both the tensions and successes of the protests and solidify an account where the protests succeeded; where the traversal of the fantasy took place and impassioned yet factional groups opened themselves to new identifications. Discourse Theory names this articulation a «counter logic», a meta-discourse that synthesizes the protean or disconnected demands, sentiments, and actions illuminating an alternative political and social regime (Glynos, Howarth [2007]: 194). Reading the counter-logic of the SGW protests through these works of media opens

a discursive-vector or a “horizon of possibility” where it becomes possible to imagine the desired outcome to strategize and calculate the tactical steps necessary for its construction.

Indeed, retrospection on the protests began almost immediately after their culmination. Forsythe’s (1971) academic volume brought together essays written by the activists to understand and conceptualize the significance of the event. The event was also an organizing point for reflection and discussion amongst the radical left factions involved in the scene. A 20-year remembrance meeting brought together original activists with scholars to discuss the legacy and lessons of the time (C025-017-43/C4).

Contemporary testaments include a feature documentary (Shum [2015]), a CBC limited series [2023], podcast (CBC Radio [2021]) and play (Brown et al. [2024]). All highlight the multi-racial and transnational scaffolding that supported the demands of the Black Caribbean students in protesting the racism of the institution. The CBC series *Black Life: Untold Stories* (2023) zooms-in on a moment of *jouissance* in solidarity, as activists sheepishly describe in interviews the street-fight that took place outside the Hall building between the White Quebecois labor movement and the crowd of racist hecklers. An anecdote from the podcast series *ReCall* (2021) captures the vivid and striking tenor of optimism, passion, and hope the activists found in solidarity with one-another and how this meshing destabilized the fixity of their identifications. Phillippe Fis-Aime, the Haitian activist and organizer of the SGW protests narrates a meeting that took place in Montreal at the Black Writers Conference between Stokely Carmichael and Mario Bachand:

Philippe FilsAime: That was a very, very hot meeting, at the end of which Stokely made this remark. He said, this guy is either a fucking spy or he is the next fucking John Brown of North America. That’s what he said of Mario Bachand... For me, Mario Bachand was the next, the next, I don’t know, the next Trotsky, the next Fidel Castro of this country.

Host: The FLQ had made an impression and found allies. And it wasn’t long before its members would come calling on those new allies.

Moreover, the ending scene of Shum’s (2015) documentary strikes a more future-oriented and optimistic outlook. In a joyous ensemble, a collection of original protestors, their families, and contemporary anti-racism activists from Concordia University gather for a musical performance – symbolizing the potential for (or an inspiring fantasy of) harmony that can emerge from political action. In sum, these works of memory crucially (re)activate a discourse of radical democratic transnationalism that can serve as the horizon for contemporary left populism.

References

Archival collections referenced

Concordia University Special Collections – Black Studies Center Collection (F035)
 Concordia University Special Collections – Alfie Roberts and Patricia Cambridge Collection (C025)
 McGill University Archives Collection (MG 4319)

Works cited

- Austin, D., 2013: *Fear of a Black Nation: Race, Sex, and Security in Sixties Montreal*, Between the Lines, Toronto.
- Austin, D., 2018: *Moving Against the System: The 1968 Congress of Black Writers and the Making of Global Consciousness*, Pluto Press, London.
- Bloom, J., Martin, W.E., 2016: *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party*, University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Brown, T., Kym D.-F., Lydie D., Murphy-Perron M., 2024: *Blackout: The Concordia Computer Riots*, Playwrights Canada Press, Toronto.
- CBC Radio, 2021: *Recall: How to Start a Revolution*, Episode 4, “CBC Radio”, April 22, <<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/recall/transcript-recall-how-to-start-a-revolution-episode-4-1.5987486>>.
- Dawson, M.C., 2013: *Blacks In and Out of the Left*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.
- De Cleen, B., Glynos, G., Goyvaerts, J., Stavrakakis, Y., 2024: *Discourse Theory and the Turn to Practice: Lessons from the Populist Moment*, “Journal of Language and Politics” 24 (1), pp. 1-24.
- Dean, J., 2016: *Crowds and Party*, Verso Books, London.
- Di Donato, M., Fulla, M. (eds.), 2023: *Leftist Internationalisms: A Transnational Political History*, Bloomsbury Academic, London.
- Eber, D., 1969: *Canada Meets Black Power: The Computer Centre Party*, Tundra Books, Toronto.
- Eklundh, E., Tavares Furtado, H., 2022: *Populism or the European Condition?*, “Journal for the Study of Radicalism” 16 (2), pp. 21-38.
- Forsythe, D., 1971: *Let the Niggers Burn: The Sir George Williams University Affair and Its Caribbean Aftermath*, Our Generation Press, Montreal.
- Foster, S.L., 2003: *Choreographies of Protest*, “Theatre Journal” 55 (3), pp. 395-412.
- Fournier, L., 1984: *F.L.Q.: The Anatomy of an Underground Movement*, NC Press, Toronto.
- Glynos, J., 2001: *The Grip of Ideology: A Lacanian Approach to the Theory of Ideology*, “Journal of Political Ideologies” 6 (2), pp. 191-214.
- Glynos, J., 2011: *Fantasy and Identity in Critical Political Theory*, “Filozofski Vestnik” 32 (January), pp. 65-88.
- Glynos, J., Howarth, D., 2007: *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory*, Routledge, New York.
- Gowland, B., 2022: *Britain and the Repression of Black Power in the 1960s and '70s*, “Race & Class” 64 (2), pp. 20-37.
- Kamola, I., Calkivik, A., 2024: *The Archive as a Battlefield for the Future: Anti-Colonial Struggles and Insurgent Temporality*, “South Atlantic Quarterly” 123 (3), pp. 549-568.
- Kiven Tunteng, P., 1973: *Racism and the Montreal Computer Incident of 1969*, “Race” 14 (3), pp. 229-240.

- Kleinberg, R., 2023: *On the Limits of a Left-Populist Nationalism: A Radical Democratic Critique of Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Neo-Republicanism*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Essex, Colchester <<https://repository.essex.ac.uk/37129/>>.
- Kleinberg, R., 2025: *Melville and Memory: Dark Tourism, the Carceral State, and Radical Pasts*, "Crime, Media, Culture" <<https://doi.org/10.1177/17416590251370321>>.
- Laclau, E., 2005: *On Populist Reason*, Verso, London.
- Laclau, E., Mouffe, C., 1985: *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Verso, London 20012.
- Stephenson, M., 2023: *Black Life: Untold Stories*, Episode 2, "Revolution Remix" CBC Gem, October 18, <<https://gem.cbc.ca/black-life-untold-stories>>.
- Mills, S., 2010: *The Empire Within: Postcolonial Thought and Political Activism in Sixties Montreal*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal.
- Moffitt, B., 2017: *Transnational Populism? Representative Claims, Media and the Difficulty of Constructing a Transnational "People"*, "Javnost – The Public" 24 (4), pp. 409-425.
- Mouffe, C., 2018: *For a Left Populism*, Verso, London.
- Panayotu, P., 2021: *Transnational Populism and the European Union: An Uneasy Alliance? The Case of DiEM25*, in Blokker, P. (ed.), *Imagining Europe: Transnational Contestation and Civic Populism*, Palgrave Macmillan, London.
- Shum, M., 2015: *Ninth Floor*, Documentary, National Film Board of Canada (NFB), 1h21m, <https://www.nfb.ca/film/ninth_floor/>.
- Slate, N. (ed.), 2012: *Black Power beyond Borders: The Global Dimensions of the Black Power Movement*, Palgrave Macmillan, London.
- Stavrakakis, Y., 2007: *The Lacanian Left: Psychoanalysis, Theory, and Politics*, SUNY Press, Albany.
- Venizelos, G., Stavrakakis, Y., 2022: *Bound to Fail? Assessing Contemporary Left Populism*, "Constellations" 30 (3), pp. 290-308.
- Žižek, S., 1993: *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*, Duke University Press, Durham.
- Žižek, S., 2002: *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates*, Verso, London.
- Žižek, S., 2009: *The Plague of Fantasies*, Verso Books, London.