

## *Reception: texts, readers, audiences, history*

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Lee Easton and Kelly Hewson, “Reflections on the Interplay of Race, Whiteness and Canadian Identity in a Film Studies Classroom”

*Although it may seem all too obvious to say that whiteness exists in relation to blackness, there is real labor in trainings one’s eye (particularly the white eye) to discern these relationships and their changing relationships in different historical and geographic registers.*

--Tara McPherson, “Seeing Black and White: Gender and Racial Visibility”

This paper emerged from the final class of our team-taught, first-year course, an introduction to the history of narrative film. We had concluded a discussion of Marc Forster’s *Monster’s Ball* (2001), and surrounding us on the blackboards were products of the students’ personal and group responses to it. As we surveyed their work, we were startled by the acuity with which they critically analyzed the film’s representations of race and gender. But equally surprising and immediately disappointing was our discovery that despite our attempts to guide the students towards a more ambiguous and possibly reparative reading of Forster’s film, the majority assessed it as

monstrous and its protagonists as monsters-- with only marginally redemptive features.

Our apparent ‘success’ in training our students to read race did not mitigate our sense of personal failure that evening, and it is this disjuncture which provides the impetus for the following reflections. We will re-trace the steps that led to the moment we’ve begun with and, in so doing, attempt to explore the ways in which Canadian identities are constructed in relation to American cultural products – in this instance, film – and to investigate the imaginaries that we, as observer-participants, saw constructed in specific pedagogical spaces.

### **Setting the Stage: High Hopes**

The bulk of the semester consisted, more or less, of a rehearsal of narrative film chronology, but we organised the last third of the course with an explicit focus on race and representation in Hollywood films, beginning with D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), followed by Spike Lee’s *Bamboozled* (2000) and *Do the Right Thing* (1989), concluding with Marc Forster’s *Monster’s Ball* (2001). At the outset, our aim was to encourage, engage with and better understand what we call “popular” readings, that is, readings generated by students. We imagined what these readings might comprise; and we assumed, then, that our task would be to try and ‘train’

Canadian eyes, in bodies of all colours, to discern the relations of race as they were represented in these specific American films. To get at these popular readings, we offered a variety of vehicles of expression: student journals, directed viewing responses, group discussion, on-line discussions and focus groups. As will become evident, we were tactical in our use of ‘expert’ readings. We hoped to model a discursive space which allowed for critical reading practices which reveal the operation of oppression, without discounting the possibilities, in the case of the final film in our unit, for reparative readings that might allow for a transformation of race relations. Guided perhaps not carefully enough by Buckingham and Green’s (1994) cautionary advice – to be modest in our assumptions about what a transformative critical pedagogy can achieve – we embarked on an unsettling journey.

We begin with our class discussion on *The Birth of a Nation*, in which we discovered the ways students positioned themselves in relation to “the badge” of whiteness (Appiah 1985). We then turn to the students’ receptions of *Bamboozled*, and our recognition of students’ taking up of a transnational racialized identity. Finally, we consider the film *Monster’s Ball* and our observations over the conflict between “popular” readings and our “expert” readings. Drawing on Aniko Brodoughkozy’s (2002) argument that Canadian

viewers of American television adopt a fluid identity position, we posit that similar strategies are evident in popular readings of American film, but these strategies are ultimately problematic when dealing with questions of race and representation in a Canadian context, or at least in a Western Canadian context. Upon reflection, our experiences underscore the “slippery” nature of popular culture, those “subtleties that can’t always be accounted for in the production, promotion and reception of cultural artifacts” (Nicks and Sloniowski 2002), and how this slipperiness can work against a progressive pedagogy. We want to argue that in order for cultural studies’ approaches to have power in the pedagogical space of the classroom, more attention must be given to the way students’ pre-existing experiences of race can readily produce performances of critical readings of film texts. We want to suggest that the disjunction we experienced was the product not only of OUR wish for white repair but also an underestimation of the processes by which Canadian students respond to American cultural representations. We had not fully imagined their immersion in Canadian discourses of a tolerant, multiracial, multicultural society.

In outlining these narratives, we want to acknowledge the relationship between researcher and researched subjects is particularly complicated since we are not only participant-observers but teachers of the student- subjects we

are describing. Particularly germane to this recounting is our particular social location. First, we teach in Calgary, which besides being the epicenter of Canadian right-wing politics, is, with its high concentration of American oil company headquarters, arguably the most Americanized of Canada's major cities. And, despite a prominent aboriginal presence and changes that a recent influx of immigration has brought to the city, making it home to one of Canada's largest South Asian communities, the most recent census confirms that Calgary remains largely white, middle-class and heterosexual. Our institution, a university-transfer college that aspires to full university status, reflects these demographic realities. Our full-time faculty complement remains resolutely white while our student body increasingly reflects the changes in the city's demographics.

Finally, our thinking has been informed by the challenge to queer theory Eve Sedgwick (1997) laid out some years ago in her anthology *Novel Gazing*: to move beyond a preoccupation with what she called critical "paranoid" readings—ones marked by hatred, suspicion, envy and anxiety, and which, drawing primarily on Foucault, focus on the disciplining elements of texts and reading practices. Turning to the psychoanalytic work of Melanie Klein, Sedgwick (1997) posits that the paranoid position is always in the "oscillatory context of a very different possible one, the depressive

position” (8) and from this position it is possible “to use one’s resources to assemble or ‘repair’ the part-object into something like a whole—though not...*necessarily like any pre-existing whole* [emphasis added]”(8). Central to Sedgwick’s challenge is her wish to acknowledge that as necessary as critical paranoid readings remain, we must also pay more attention to those with the capacity to reconstruct sources of pain into objects capable of providing sustenance. This concept, we thought, might be mobilized to help those students who identified as ‘white’ to find within their paranoid readings of the film texts the possibilities for a form of repair. After all, as Sedgwick (1997) suggests, the reparative impulse “wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an objects that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self” (28). We have found Sedgwick’s challenge a useful means to conceptualize how we might provide students the tools not only to (re)produce critical readings, but also to locate resources for repair and, possibly, reconciliation. It was in thinking through this approach that we constructed our course’s focus on race and representation culminating with *Monster’s Ball*, a film we felt at the time provided an excellent vehicle to apply such thinking.

**Vignette 1: *The Birth of the Nation*, or Learning the Conflicts of Race Pedagogy**

From the outset, we debated the inclusion of Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*(1915) on the syllabus and its presence on the course outline was bearing down on us—in fact, when it came time to show it, Hewson balked. Just a very few minutes before our class, we agreed to follow Graff's (1992) advice to teach the conflicts by “performing” our own struggle over the problematics of this film. Our quickly-devised strategy, *undoubtedly the product of the luxury of our whiteness*, was that Easton would enter the class on his own and lay out his points for discussion: the revolutionary, innovative techniques of this decidedly racist film and the importance of it in establishing an audience for Hollywood film. After 20 minutes, Hewson would interrupt the class and explicitly register her dismay at the decision to show it.

What happened after this pseudo-staged event was interesting. First of all, the students were shocked to see our ‘team’ unravel before them. The gender and sexual dynamics became clear: it was as if we were parents arguing and the “children” were feeling uncomfortable about the possibility of having to take sides. Before we could tell them what we had done, that we were in fact acting out critical positions on the film, one student offered her opinion, calling Hewson's intervention censorship. She wanted to see the movie for its technical prowess and decide for herself whether said-prowess

was over-ridden by the content. Various student voices then joined in the debate, the majority of them vociferously against viewing the film in the classroom. Significantly, some said they would view *The Birth of A Nation* in the privacy of their own home.

At this point, several white students left the room, whether out of a sense of righteous anger or simply to skip class, we're not sure. However, it is worth considering these students' reactions in more detail. Without erasing their own rationale for wanting to view *The Birth of a Nation* in the *privacy* of their own home, we'd like to suggest some other possible readings of their action. In one way, by claiming a right to skip the *public* viewing of the film, these students inadvertently position white racism as a private, not public matter. Race then—like sexuality-- is essentially privatized—a matter of *choice* of how “public” one makes it. Just as queers should not “flaunt” their sexuality in public because it is impolite and makes heterosexuals uncomfortable, white racism should also remain comfortably closeted, an open secret about which no one speaks. But perhaps there is something else at work here too—something inherent in our film class where texts are viewed collectively. Like print books that can be consumed in the privacy of one's own room and where one's shame can be more easily hidden<sup>1</sup>, the students' desire to view the film in a private space suggests they are



transferring the reading practices learned from print sources to this medium. Perhaps the white students' impulse to view the film privately speaks to the shame and guilt they might feel by being associated in a public space with Griffith's racist filmic representations. More importantly, the white students' choice to absent themselves from the public space of the classroom and the ensuing discussion of race is a manifestation of white privilege and at best leaves the impression that for some white people, the discussion of race is optional.

We then took the opportunity to reveal, one, that while we were acting, we also weren't. And second, now that we had made race in American film an issue, we wanted the students to work with their own specific recollections of a racialised experience and identity. Drawing on Henry Louis Gates' work (1985), we asked students to write briefly about how they experienced *whiteness*. While we originally decided to have the students share their ideas in groups, Hewson improvised and asked for volunteers to read out their responses in what became an incredibly candid, powerful hour.

This exercise not only sketched out the discursive themes that would dominate our discussions but also revealed much about how these students experienced race within their lives. There were the familiar predictable disclaimers from a few white students about how "race" exists but doesn't

matter. One, for example, claimed to have many black and brown friends with whom he fit just fine and questioned why we were discussing race in a film studies course. As Boler and Zembylas (2003) point out, this position is symptomatic of a liberal individualism that wants to deny or erase difference. There were responses too that fell into the category of celebration/tolerance, where all differences are equally championed (Boler and Zembylas 2003). Common among these comments were the emphases on “the richness” of cultural diversity.

However, there were several student responses that revealed “race” as existing in material way. Born in Calgary and self-identified as Malaysian-Indian, one student explained that until she visited India, she too thought that race existed but didn’t matter. After her trip to India, she became intensely aware of how white privilege operated in her daily life in Calgary. She urged the students to take up the viewing position of African Americans watching *The Birth of a Nation*. Like her, another student also assured the class race does exist. An African-Italian whose medical condition lightens his skin, he stated, “I know what white people say about black people because they take me as white.” Undoubtedly those students who claimed hybrid and/or minority identities were more eloquent in their awareness of the ways in which race permeated their lives. One young woman, for example, spoke of

her dilemma as a young Métis girl who constantly faced official forms that demanded she identify as “white” or “Aboriginal” and the pressure she felt to check off “white.” Finally, another woman, who many see as white, spoke about how her dark-skinned brother is assumed to be adopted or not even a family member. These stories stood in contradiction to the more benevolent face of “race” that other students’ dialogue had produced.

In the process of telling their stories, then, the students collectively produced a construction of race in Alberta, one that stood in stark contrast to Griffith’s film. Indeed, in direct opposition to those “American” representations, the dominant narrative here was of a benign multicultural Canada where “race” exists, but ideally is just “another” difference among many. It was not that some white students had not experienced “race” themselves, since a number had attended schools where they were numerically a minority group. For them, racial difference, although important, remained simply that—difference that needed to be tolerated and possibly even accepted. We want to emphasize this latter point since a tolerance and multiculturalism are central tenets of Canadian identity, even in Calgary, often represented in the Canadian media as a “redneck” city. Interestingly, Mount Royal College draws many students from the outlying rural communities in Alberta, which adds another telling dimension to the

construction of race we saw in this discussion. For instance, several students spoke about how racism operated in their small towns; according to their stories, there racism simply existed--like a fact-- and only when they moved to urban centers did they recognize how wrong the racism was. But it was not so simple to generalize that racism itself was confined or more prevalent in rural parts of the West. Another student from rural Saskatchewan quickly intervened with her own experience of a multi-ethnic extended family in order to dispel any myth of homogenized (white) rural environment.

What was evident to us from this evening was twofold. First, the students appeared to be attuned to race in ways that were surprising to us, and it was presumptuous of us to assume students enter our classes without thinking about how race informs their lives. As some of their thinking demonstrates, many of the students are keenly attuned to critical discourses of race but have negotiated these into a form of liberal tolerance. Central to this negotiation is the greater or lesser extent to which they also endorsed the underlying values of liberal individualism on which such tolerance rests. More precisely, even when confronted with stories that challenged the assumption of race as one difference among many, there was a desire to maintain the “official” narrative of individuality, choice and tolerance as central values in the discourse of race.

## **Vignette #2--Reading Monsters in Spike Lee's *Bamboozled***

The next week's class began with a discussion of stereotypes; their promulgation in American media; and, via Stuart Hall, some focus on who owns and controls the image and ways to deconstruct it. We then showed Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* (2000). It would have been worthwhile to have taped the audience responses to this provocative film: how the laughter was hearty at first, but as we were bluntly confronted with the barrage of racist images and the arrogant white appropriation of black culture, the laughter became more nervous and eventually disappeared. Discomfiture was palpable and by the film's end, there was a striking silence.

The question of whether or not *Bamboozled* was an effective satire or not seemed moot: this film, with its in-your-face portrayal of the (North) American media's reliance on crude black stereotypes for entertainment, provoked the most serious thought and discussion about race of all. As one student wrote in a journal response,

Finally, a movie that provoked thought – I mean, I had no idea there was such a history of such degrading imagery—and I think it was very ingenious of Spike Lee to put me in the position of black people – the position of having to watch and see reproduced in figurines and on advertisements and in the

media inhuman images of yourself that are used to amuse and entertain white people, primarily, and yet you, the person, being so-called represented, is being forced to laugh.

Interestingly, although the montage the student references is explicitly American, the student's response does not take up national identity; rather, it posits racial identities as transnational. In some ways, this response confirms Bernard Ostry's (1993) contention that because of America cultural hegemony, Canadians are always-already Americans, knowing American values. Or, perhaps this response is better framed as an example of how fluid Canadian identities respond to American culture. Aniko Bodroghkozy (2002) argues in relation to Canadian television viewing that, similar to the female spectator who moves fluidly between feminine and masculine viewing positions of narratives constructed from and for a "male gaze," Canadian viewers might also adopt a doubled spectatorship from which they draw ironic pleasures that are lost on their American viewers. She contends that it is easy for Canadians as television viewers to "adopt an American subject position when necessary or desirable" (Bodroghkozy 2002, 574). To use Caughie's (1990) formulation, we can "play at being American". This fluid subjectivity is complicated in two ways when viewing American film. First, our students often arrive at the class with only stereotypical notions of

Canadian films as dull and pretentious.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, few have much sense of the Canadian tradition of filmmaking beyond the success of high-profile directors such as David Cronenberg. Second, unlike television and radio where forms of state intervention have ensured that a Canadian sensibility has been brought to cultural production and hence to Canadian viewers<sup>3</sup>, we contend that without the same sense of “Canadian” film, there is a tendency among students to slip into discourses that appear based on their concept of America. In short, for many Canadians, American filmic imaginary *is* the Canadian film imaginary, at least in the initial encounter. As the above student response suggests, nation and borders become elided as he “played at being American.” In fact, the class engaged in the discussions of race *as if* they were Americans, seeing *Bamboozled* through American eyes as it were. This slippage, though, was not consistent as we were to discover when we came to show *Monster’s Ball*.

### **Vignette #3—Reading Monsters: Essaying the Move to Repair**

To read from a reparative position is to surrender the knowing, anxious paranoid determination that no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall ever come to the reader as new: to a reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise.

---Eve Sedgwick, *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*

We chose to end the course with Marc Forster's *Monster's Ball* (2002), figuring, before we arrived at this unit, it would act as a kind of measured response to issues of racism. When we originally viewed *Monster's Ball*, we understood it as a film critically excoriating a society that incarcerates 25 percent of its black male population; that did not shirk from the grim realities of white racism; and that could be seen as a bitter indictment of a capitalist, racist, sexist society while *at the same time* positing that from the wreckage of this system, there might be a way forward based on clemency.<sup>4</sup> We decided not put our 'expert' reading out to the students, not wishing to inflect their responses through our more studied interpretations. Instead, Easton introduced Morrison's concept of the white imagination (1993) as way to consider representations of race within a film produced by a white filmmaker for a white audience. But what a surprise we were in for, post-viewing. The students had not simply watched the film, they had watched through it--by shifting their viewing perspectives to more overtly "Canadian" ones.

These shifts were most evident in their responses to a series of questions we gave each group to address. For example, we let them know that Angela Basset turned down the role of Letitia, declaring it another stereotypical, hypersexualised black female part, and we asked them what



they thought of Letitia's character. Every group perceived her as a cliché: the down-and-out, alcoholic, abusive mother, one step from the street, dependent emotionally and economically on the white guy, the 'white knight' as one student said. Another asked, "Is there no other story for a black woman *in America* [emphasis added]? I'm tired of seeing this same one played out. It's like history hasn't affected her at all. It's like she's frozen." The scene that troubled them most was when Letitia turns to Hank and says "I need taking care of." One young woman in the class barely stifled a gag. When asked to put the gag reflex into words, she had this to say: "Oh, please...not another woman powerless to take care of herself."

While it is tempting to assume the students' critical perspectives were the consequence of our superior teaching prowess, we prefer to suggest these criticisms of Letitia's character go to the heart of both the imaginaries from which these students operate as Canadian spectators of American cultural products. When referring to television viewing habits, Bodroghkozy (2002) states that "Canadians do know that "here" is not the American "there" (574). As the first student comments suggest, there was an awareness of watching an American movie and wanting something more, like a well-meaning relation wants more for her wayward kin. At the same time, as Frank Manning suggests, Canadians "reconstitute and recontextualize American

cultural products [such as film] in ways representative of what consciously, albeit ambiguously, distinguishes Canada from its powerful neighbor: state capitalism, social democracy, middle-class morality, regional identities, official multiculturalism” (Manning 1993, 8). We want to suggest, in fact, that the highly critical nature of the comments were derived precisely because the students did not “play Americans”, but spoke as Canadians whose own policies of multiculturalism and official stories of tolerance would suggest that such racial injustice is not part of Canada—even when the week before we had heard evidence to the contrary.

We also asked the class to consider the implications of an outsider, Marc Forster, a Swiss citizen, directing the film. We talked about an interview he gave in which he expressed that in some sense he felt his distance from the United States allowed him to offer his perceptions of race relations there. When asked what they thought of that formulation, some students took up the common myth of observer neutrality: that if you approach the topic with the right kind of understanding and empathy, you can ‘do’ what you want, no matter if you’re an insider or outsider. Others commented on Forster’s audacity. Some thought his outsider status was responsible for the blatant quality of everything in this movie – the white bigotry, the sexism, the obvious clichéd symbolism, and the sex. One student

articulated the problem interestingly: she said, “There seems to be a gap between [what] the film is claiming to portray and what, in fact, it does, and I don’t know if that’s the director’s fault or that this class has taught us to look at films more critically now for their codes and whatnot.” Another student thought it would be worthwhile for Forster to take a look at the notion of reception—that he didn’t consider his audience carefully enough. He wasn’t thinking about the effects of his portrayals on a (North) American audience: “Maybe he needs to understand that the perspective from which this film is credible is pretty narrow.” These responses are striking only because of the easy erasure of the fact that *we* were also “outsiders” looking in on another American problem—capital punishment. As residents in a country where capital punishment has been abolished, we cannot “play American” on this topic despite the numerous attempts from the law and order crowd (many of whom are resident in Western Canada) to reinstate the death penalty.

In a similar vein, *Monster’s Ball* depends heavily on the interrelationship between black and white images to guide our allegiances-- racial, social and personal. Several students commented on the over-determined use of black and white: “Like how much more obvious can you get?” They found such blatant marking shut off thought rather than provoked it. When we indicated that these visual opposites served political as well as

cinematographic purposes, one student said, “Well, yeah, it’s like all the people in the movie can only see in black and white.”

Here again the problem of Canadians watching American culture surfaces along with the challenge of importing American cultural products into a Canadian classroom. While Morrison’s formulation of a white imagination is incredibly useful in teaching race in a (North) American setting, its uniquely American focus on black-white relations tends to obscure, for instance, the difficult history of Native peoples and Europeans in Canada. Indeed, the problem in focusing on American race relations between black and white was underscored when one student reminded us, “Don’t forget about brown.” In Canada, this comment is particularly important since South Asian communities are among the fastest growing. The unique mix of black, Native and European peoples in Canada coupled with differences in philosophy about multiculturalism suggests that adaptations to Morrison’s concept of the white imagination are required in a Canadian context.

Still trying to move the students towards considering the possibilities of a story of contingent white repair,<sup>5</sup> we posed our final question to them: Do you see any hope at the film’s conclusion? After all, Letitia has moved into Hank’s house. He got rid of the bigoted father and whitewashed the dark oak walls; he bought a gas station – *Clement’s* on Prospect – and renamed it

*Letitia's*. He wants to take care of her. They are two damaged people, trying to nurture themselves and each other through this connection. Having struggled to resist the connection with Hank and then turning herself over to it, Letitia discovers the pictures drawn by her dead husband identifying Hank as his executioner, a dramatic fact Hank has failed to reveal to her. She enters the kitchen – the medium shot is framed carefully to ensure we cannot see what's in her hands—and says nothing. Hank has come back from the store with the ice cream, tells her she looks pretty, and they leave the house to sit on the porch. From Letitia's perspective, the camera pans to three graves: those of Hank's mother, wife and son. Hank then says, "I think we're gonna be alright". Letitia says nothing, but turns her gaze to the constellations in the sky.

In our critical-reparative "expert" reading, we had envisioned the film's conclusion as representing, on the part of Letitia, an act of clemency. That in saying nothing, she pardons Hank, in full awareness of the dynamics of their connection and what he has done but not admitted. We did not see her as choosing victimage, but as choosing to extend to Hank the one thing which he had not extended either to her ex-husband or his son: leniency. While by no means forgiving Hank or the white racism he is attempting to transcend, we interpreted the ending as a provisional act of clemency, an act

that provides each with one more chance—and this in a nation where three strikes can often mean one is, quite literally, out.

The majority of students, however, said there was no hope in the ending. For instance, the feeling that Letitia had a gun and intended to shoot Hank was so strong that one student, while viewing the film, formed his hands into a gun and pointed them at the screen. But such paranoid knowledge was upset as Letitia, not following the typical revenge narrative, simply sits on the stoop. Other students suggested Letitia is simply realizing the utter futility of fighting against the monumental institution of white racism. The majority, though, saw Letitia as exercising a choice, though they differed on the nature of the choice. For several she chooses victimhood and dependence whereas others still saw her as choosing, but choosing for pragmatic, cynical reasons: they saw her as simply biding her time for payback. They read Letitia's glance at the graves as a sign she was going to get Hank in one of them eventually. "Then the garage, the house and the truck could be completely hers," reported one group.

This insistence on choice is significant in several respects. First, it is our observation that students in colleges—especially university-transfer students who have consciously chosen their education route—are emotionally invested in liberal individualism and the concept of agency and free choice,

even when the choices are essentially negative. Because *they* have chosen their path against many odds, so too must others be choosing theirs. But the social-political discourses of Calgary and Alberta are also entangled in this view. Here in the political heartland of the Canadian right-wing and rugged individualism, it is routinely stated that people choose poverty, just as Letitia must “choose” to be a victim. In a province with the highest surplus in the country and the lowest welfare rates, there is a sense that poverty is not the product of systemic biases but the consequence of individual bad choices. In free-market Alberta, neo-liberal beliefs that profess the market economy always provides options—even when those options are only Pepsi or Coke-- have taken especially deep roots. Our students’ interpretations of *Monster’s Ball* underscore the way in which ‘race’ operates in relation to their abiding beliefs in liberal individualism and its purported rewards.

### **Reading Monsters: Performing the Critical Reading of Race**

*As cultural and individual users of popular artifacts, our own reception can become slippery because reception cannot be entirely contained or predicted. -----Joan Nicks and Jeannette Sloniowski, Slippery Pastimes: Reading the Popular in Canadian Culture*

What then can we say about reading monsters in the film studies classroom? On the one hand, we come away from this paper thinking that this

unit was more about OUR wish for white repair than evidence of any real repair in either the movie or the class. Psychoanalytic approaches to pedagogy remind teachers about the problem of transferences. While we might want our students to want what we want, we must be mindful of acknowledging their desires, even when they are contrary to our own. The balancing act here is between the assertion of our position to profess certain kinds of reading strategies and the students' right to refuse. In fact, their readings taught us that perhaps *we* were the reading monsters, who, through our white eyes governed by a desire for repair, presumed we had arrived at an "enlightened" reading of what *Monster's Ball* was claiming to portray. The students' reception to Forster's film made us see that our desire for repair, based precariously on our own white hope, was potentially monstrous. We wanted our students to go further than the trajectory of the film class's narrative had prepared them to go, and in the process, stood uncomfortably close to forcing our practiced interpretations onto them.

And indeed, we *were* trying to push them to a place that was strange and unnatural --monstrous. (In fact, after watching some of *The Birth of a Nation*, Hewson went home and re-viewed *Monster's Ball*, called Easton and left this message on his answering machine: "Oh my god!—This is all about white supremacy, and the stereotypes are still being deployed.") Our



reparative interpretations, especially when seen as they were in this class—as unrealistic or naïve-- were difficult for students to accept given the intensive work we already had them do around the badge of whiteness. We stated earlier that reading for repair entails surprises and for us, the surprise was the students' willingness to give us a critical reading and their refusal to move away from it. Our students' responses reminded us of Richard Rorty's (1996) contention that one cannot find "inspirational value in a text at the same time as you are viewing it as a... mechanism of cultural production" (13). This proposition suggests critical readings such as those we initially encouraged our students to produce are at the expense of the reparative reading we also sought to promote. Perhaps teachers need to see critical reading practices not as an end in themselves but as a beginning point for further work. In particular, we propose a more explicit exploration of how ideologies of multiculturalism have contributed to structures of feeling that produce critical readings and resist reparative ones. Even so, we will be more tentative in our project of transforming potentially oppressive texts into critical resources for repair and reconciliation.

On the other hand, the popular readings emphasising only the monsters in the film point us to some other considerations, ones often discussed in anti-racist pedagogy, which gain importance when theorizing how Canadians in

particular regions approach particular American film texts. First, training Canadian students, especially those who identify as white, requires careful attention to the fluidity of responses that shift quickly from those who speak *as if* Americans to those nourished by the discourses of Canadian multiculturalism. Certainly given the responses on the board and in the final examination, the students seemed to have been better trained in differentiating the relationships between white and black, although not necessarily those of other colors. Moreover, we need to be more aware of how deeply neo-liberal ideology has infiltrated our students' sensibilities. Critiquing notions of individualism and choice has become more difficult than ever, especially when our students are significantly invested in those concepts themselves.

Finally, we feel this experience encourages us to further reflect on the way Canadian film teachers might use American films in the film studies classroom. If popular readings of American filmic texts do employ the kind of double spectatorship we suggested we saw at work in our students' responses, then this fluidity is not only a resource for the production of unique Canadian identities, it is also a refuge from dealing with the real problems of race in this country. As we saw, there is resistance to acknowledging the reality of race as a difference that counts, particularly

because Canadian identity is so often defined as “not American.” How to accept the problem of racism in Canada without becoming that which you have already said you are not? The self-same identity that prides itself on tolerance, multiculturalism, social justice and so forth also becomes the barrier to moving beyond what is, at best, a celebratory approach to racial and ethnic difference. Add to this problem the international element of Canadian identity as peacekeeper, a “better” country than the United States, and we begin to see how difficult it will be to recast the model of benign multiculturalism. From this perspective, however, *Monster’s Ball* may be a particularly excellent resource since the American imaginary on offer is, in fact, one imagined by someone who is not American, Forster, and who thinks, by virtue of his outsider status, he can see more clearly.

There is an important parallel here with the readings our class performed of *Monster’s Ball*. The facility with which our students performed a critical reading of the dynamics of race and representation was predicated on a talking about “other people’s” racism. Training our Canadian white students (and indeed, those of other ethnicities and racial identities) to discern the relationships of “race” in American films poses a particular dilemma since it enables what one of our colleagues, Aruna Srivastava, calls the “performance” of a critical reading. Such a performed critical reading is not a

reflection of the rhetor's own experiences of race or racism, but is a speaking about "other people's racism." It is this ability to produce critical performances of race (indeed of differences) without connecting to personal investments which is ultimately problematic and frustrating. In part, this highlights the slipperiness of popular artifacts (Nicks and Sloniowski 2002) and the concomitant problem of anticipating students' reception in the classroom. However, the problem is also linked to the model of outcomes-based education where our students learn to become adept at performing outcomes at a cognitive level without necessarily integrating those outcomes within affective frameworks. At a time when some observers have called for pedagogy to engage more extensively with the affective dimension (Olsen and Worsham 1999, Sedgwick 1997, hooks 2000), our experiences suggest this engagement will be harder to accomplish than we first anticipated.

Yet, we see that our students provided us with the paranoid readings we apparently led them to think we wanted. In their determination to be critical and to differentiate themselves from the horrors of American racism, they were not ready or able to experience the surprise so central to a reparative reading. And in our desire to bring them to a reparative, affective response, we underestimated their investments in critical paranoid reading practices. We were the ones surprised by but not entirely displeased with

their responses. Perhaps a critical paranoid reading is a potentially fruitful starting point, with our project ahead to consider other ways and means by which to negotiate the “slipperiness” of popular culture.

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### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup>See Francis Barker’s *The Tremulous Private Body* (1995) where the connection between print books, privacy and shame are explored.

<sup>2</sup>We need not rehearse here all the contributing factors to such stereotypes, notwithstanding the Canadian conglomerate Onex’s acquisition of Loews-Cineplex and Famous Players, American control over Canadian film distribution and exhibition has remained an important systemic factor in the lack of awareness of Canadian film. This situation has not changed much even with Onex in control.

<sup>3</sup>Notwithstanding the National Film Board and feature film funding provided through Telefilm Canada, there is no equivalent to the Canadian content regulations that the Canadian Radio Television and Telecommunication Commission has mandated for radio and television, or to the CBC.

<sup>4</sup>“Clemency” according to the OED, means “mildness or gentleness of temper, as shown in the exercise of authority or power; mercy, *leniency*. [emphasis added].” What we wish to highlight is Letitia’s deliberate exercise of leniency towards Hank and his role in her son’s death.

<sup>5</sup>By “white” repair we mean a recognition of white complicity in the operation of racial oppression, especially with respect to African Americans in North America.

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