A War Within a War:
Canadian Reactions to D. W. Griffith’s
The Birth of a Nation

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D. W. Griffith’s wildly successful epic film was released in Canada, a nation at war, in 1915. Based on the novel and play The Clansman by Thomas Dixon, the motion picture popularized a pro-Southern view of the Civil War and Reconstruction era that demonized African Americans and abolitionists and made heroes of the first Ku Klux Klan. This paper examines Canadian responses to the film in 1915 and 1916, paying particular attention to protests by African Canadians, which usually were organized through church congregations. The Birth of a Nation was a challenge for provincial film censors in a nation that supposedly frowned on American traditions of violence and supported British “fair play.” During wartime, African Canadians appealed to citizenship, patriotism, and Britishness to mount an early, if largely unsuccessful, civil rights struggle against an invading American cultural product.


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IN 1915 MOST Canadians were preoccupied with the ongoing war effort. Canadian troops saw action for the first time that year, and the national government under Robert Borden committed to an army of 500,000 men. Given that it was a volunteer army and that trench warfare was causing ongoing casualties, there was a looming military labour crisis. The newspapers were full of censored reports on the war in Europe as well as countless local stories and notices of recruitment meetings. Members of the clergy, prominent citizens, and patriotic organizations assisted these efforts. Although Canadians were expected to make sacrifices and accept government regulation in the name of the war effort, they valued their leisure hours and patronized commercial amusements. One of the most popular was the movie house, where products of the American film industry dominated. Canada had more than 1,000 movie houses in 1915, many of them still hosting vaudeville, musical, and dramatic productions. Judging by the volume of advertisements, reviews, and general publicity in the press, motion pictures were an established popular pastime.

The reception of D. W. Griffith’s film *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915 and 1916 is an ignored chapter in how Canada constructed race in relation to national identity, citizenship, and the treatment of minorities during the Great War.¹ This study focuses on reactions to the film as recorded in the press in six regionally representative Canadian cities: Vancouver, Winnipeg, Toronto, Montreal, Halifax, and Saint John. Canada’s generally positive response to the historical epic reveals the degree to which the population was already under the spell of what would later be dubbed “Hollywood.” As in the United States, the path for this controversial film was smoothed by an effective publicity machine that operated through the local press. White Canadian audiences suspended their sense of British “fair play” and supposed law-abiding nature and cheered Ku Klux Klan vigilantes as heroes. Canadian blacks, frustrated by their government’s refusal to permit their free enlistment into the army, waged their own uncoordinated war against the film. That most white Canadians accepted *The Birth of a Nation*’s inflammatory racial messages suggests that distorted and discriminatory attitudes towards racial minorities were deeply internalized. Tacit acceptance of the film by the white majority indicates that “whiteness theory,” pioneered by American historians such as David Roediger, is a useful approach to understanding Canadian society at war. In short, whiteness theory explains the white majority’s tendency to problematize visible minorities as deviant, to deny the existence of white privilege, and to view race as a category affecting only minorities.² The reaction to the film in 1915 and 1916 also reveals that Canadian blacks were aware of and influenced by racial struggles south of the border. Finally, although African Canadians outside Nova Scotia lost the battle against *The Birth of a Nation* *(BON)*, the episode is an


important early example of a civil rights struggle that paralleled court challenges to segregation and denial of service in private businesses such as hotels, theatres, and restaurants.  

**Background to The Birth of a Nation**

*The Birth of a Nation*, produced under the title *The Clansman*, was a large-scale historical drama filmed by D. W. Griffith, based on the fiction of Southern writer Thomas Dixon. Released in 1915, the film was a critical and popular success, becoming the top grossing Hollywood movie until *Gone With the Wind*. Despite its racial messages and distorted history, it has been heralded as one of the most significant motion pictures of the twentieth century, signalling the arrival of popular American cinema. The twelve-reel feature cost an unprecedented $100,000 to produce. Film critics and historians have long pointed to Griffith’s innovative film-making techniques, which included multiple camera angles, “intercutting of parallel scenes,” night scenes, “soft-focus photography and moving camera shots.’ His reputation as an early “master” of American cinema helped raise the prestige of the industry and move it towards a more middle-class form of entertainment. *BON*, despite its formulaic plot and historical and racial biases, was considered a founding work of cinematic realism.

Dixon was a Baptist minister and author from the American South who attempted to counter the romanticized abolitionist messages of the novel and stage versions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by portraying Southern whites not as villains but victims. His best-selling novels of “race hate” were a type of propaganda dedicated to defending the South. Dixon’s 1902 novel *The Leopard Spots: A Romance of the White Man’s Burden* was a white supremacist tale of Reconstruction. His stories portrayed free blacks as a threat to America, but approved of the iconic but mythical “faithful negro servant” of the pre-Civil War South. Dixon wrote that Reconstruction had been an attempt to “Africanize ten great states of the American Union.” The stage version of his 1905 novel *The Clansman*, which

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depicted the lynching of a black man by the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) for causing the death of two white women, was popular in the North as well as the South. The third novel in Dixon’s KKK trilogy, *The Traitor*, justified Jim Crow laws and lynching. The use of burning crosses by the KKK in the early twentieth century was based not on historical tradition, as the Klan following the Civil War had not displayed them, but on the influence of Dixon’s novels.

D. W. Griffith (1875-1948) was a Southerner with a romanticized family attachment to the Civil War era and a nostalgic view of plantation life. He started out as an actor and film treatment writer. Prior to *BON* he had made hundreds of movies, most of them shorts, and introduced various innovations such as the “fade out” shot. Many of his techniques were developed between 1908 and 1913 when he was working for the Biograph Company, for which he directed a number of films with Civil War themes. The genius of *The Birth of a Nation* was that it wedded the approach in films about serious subjects (derived from literature, the Bible, or history) with popular melodrama. Much of the story took place in the fictional South Carolina town “Piedmont” before, during, and after the Civil War. In later years Griffith continued to defend his masterpiece as based on historical truth, but one biographer describes the movie as “as much a fantasy as any turned out by Hollywood and not a documentary.”

*BON* was the tale of two families, one Northern and one Southern, during the Civil War and Reconstruction. Reportedly employing 18,000 extras and actors, the film included large-scale battle scenes and the re-enactment of famous historic moments such as Sherman’s march to the sea, the burning of Atlanta, and Lee’s surrender at Appomattox. Griffith’s crews literally reshaped the California countryside with sand and gravel to make it appear “more Southern.” Drawing on his earlier work and that of others, Griffith also incorporated rescue and fight scenes, melodramatic moments, and damsels in distress. Elaborate sequences of trench warfare illustrating operations near Petersburg, Virginia, were especially evocative for audiences of the World War I era. Audiences applauded the KKK as heroes and reacted to black soldiers in blue uniforms as villains.

Film historians have focused on Griffith’s fears of miscegenation and black sexuality as the essence of *BON*. Scenes of the Freedman’s Bureau depict a sign with the words “Equal Marriage,” and the intertitle card that follows a scene in which the black-dominated South Carolina legislature passes an intermarriage bill reads “the grim reaping begins.” Whites played most of the major African American characters in black face. The most controversial scenes depict virginal white women as victims of predatory black or mixed-race males. In the famous cabin siege scene, for example, Southern patriarch Dr. Cameron and a Union army veteran prepare to kill their daughters, one of whom is a child, rather than let them

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12 *The Province* [Vancouver], December 14, 1915.
fall into the hands of lustful black soldiers. Both of the rescue scenes at the end of the story involve white men protecting white women from lustful black or “mulatto” (mixed race) males; the besieged party in the cabin scene, a mixture of Confederate and Union war veterans, is described as defending “their Aryan birthright.” According to Robert Henderson, the film’s racial messages “played on the fears of white audiences.”

In early release the film bore the name The Clansman, but someone, possibly in advertising, suggested The Birth of a Nation. Appearing at a time when America was divided over the issue of the First World War, the title suggested the importance of the reconciliation of the Southern and Northern states. This mythical version of history depicted Lincoln, a prestigious historical figure, as a benevolent friend of the defeated Confederacy. More chilling for race relations was the interpretation that national unity could be achieved with the subjugation of Southern blacks and even, four decades after the end of the Civil War, their expulsion to Africa. The film begins by explaining that blacks, not their enslavement by whites, were the root of American disunion. Expulsion was an extreme position even among Southern whites, but BON’s message that the Reconstruction era was a tragic time for Southern whites was widely accepted in America, thanks to fiction, journalism, and historical writing. Woodrow Wilson’s A History of the American People (1902), the source for a number of the film’s intertitles, explained that the rise of the KKK was a positive development that saved the South from the excesses of freed blacks, carpetbaggers, and scallywags. This view of Reconstruction, dominant into the 1930s, blamed blacks and Northern carpetbaggers for terrorizing whites and causing corruption, necessitating the rise of the KKK and the eventual triumph of states’ rights, the denial of voting rights for blacks, and segregation laws by the 1890s. One of the final scenes in BON shows armed Clansmen preventing Southern blacks from voting, the final vindication of a “people’s struggle for existence,” in the words of one Canadian press notice.

Reactions in the United States and Great Britain
A substantial publicity campaign paved way for BON, which was billed as “the 8th Wonder of the World.” The film was much anticipated in cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, and Boston, where it was credited with reviving a dull season and associated with line-ups at theatres and steady advance ticket sales. Small-town audiences were flattered that a prestigious “metropolitan” road show production would travel to their communities. It was also proof that expensive “high class” movies could attract audiences. A contemporary example exhibited in Canada was Pastrone’s Italian historical film Cabiria, which included a large cast and special effects, fetched high ticket prices, and ran two and a half

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16 Montreal Daily Mail, May 1, 1916. In the academic sphere, these views were upheld by the influential Columbia University professor William Dunning.
Both audiences and critics responded enthusiastically to Griffith’s epic, which had its own special musical score (with more than 200 cues) for a mid-sized or large orchestra. Griffith’s distribution company worked with road show companies of between 50 and 100 individuals and arranged for the movie to be exhibited in many small and mid-sized towns and in theatres normally reserved for live performance. The large-scale, elaborate scenes, technical innovations, and attention to historical detail offset the melodramatic plot. The film helped create a number of stars such as Lillian Gish. BON also proved that audiences were prepared to pay higher ticket prices and sit through movies that were nearly three hours in length. The movie established Griffith’s international reputation and made him a great deal of money (Louis B. Mayer earned a small fortune by securing the New England distribution rights).

Local and state authorities in a number of jurisdictions attempted to block Griffith’s film or insist that the more objectionable scenes be cut. It was controversial on three grounds: sex, violence, and the depiction of race. In the tradition of melodrama, white actors in black face portrayed the black villains in grotesque fashion. Although its comic scenes were limited, BON did depict Southern blacks eating watermelons, acting incompetent or childlike, or performing stereotypical dances for Northern visitors. Little of this was new in popular cinema. For most whites, The Birth of a Nation was simply an entertaining historical epic laced with melodrama and romance; for many African Americans, it was a “race” film. According to Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, white directors in the early twentieth century created “a fantasy of blackness” in which black characters required control by whites. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), backed by white liberals, attempted to have the film banned. The organization, formed in 1909, was rooted in the short-lived Niagara Movement, which began with a meeting of black leaders including W. E. B. DuBois in 1905. The group, which distanced itself from the more conciliatory self-help approach of Booker T. Washington, stressed goals such as voting rights, civil liberty, economic opportunity, education, and the need to protest against racial discrimination and staged its first meeting at Niagara Falls, Ontario.

The NAACP feared that the movie would create unrest and justify discrimination against African Americans. Its campaign forced both Dixon and Griffith to lash out at critics in the name of “free speech,” artistic licence, and historical “truth.” They asserted that only a militant minority of blacks opposed the film; Dixon defended the movie as “a very cautious and modest presentation” of his novel. Although

17 The Province [Vancouver], December 12 and 17, 1915; Amherst Daily News, January 21 and 26, 1916; Moncton Daily Times, March 27, 1916.
sympathetic with the plight of industrial workers, Griffith regarded his white liberal critics as modern versions of the supposedly unreasonable abolitionists who had destabilized the nation in the nineteenth century. In 1917 he was heading the National Association of the Motion Picture Industry’s anti-censorship effort. That year Congress defeated a bill that would have established federal censorship of motion pictures, a vote interpreted as a major victory for the industry. The director and his supporters pointed to a positive “race” message at the end of The Birth of a Nation: scenes of industrious blacks training at the Hampton Institute. Similar to the Tuskegee Institute, the Virginia school, founded in 1868, was a training ground for black educators, some of whom attempted to “Americanize” Native Americans at the institution by preparing them for domestic service. The Hampton scenes, lauded by many white film reviewers, reflected approval of the gradualist approach to racial improvement advocated by Booker T. Washington. This “epilogue,” which was filmed by the Institute, not Griffith, was added to help undercut opposition in cities such as Boston and New York. According to Melvyn Stokes, it was not screened in many cities in the United States.23

In anticipation of criticisms from black leaders and white liberals, Griffith had already cut a number of the more contentious scenes from the final version. These included a letter from Lincoln stating that blacks were inferior to whites and scenes dealing with or depicting lynching, black men attacking white women, and blacks being deported from New York harbour to Africa. Another controversial sequence that was excised was a love scene between Senator Stoneman and his “mulatto” mistress Lydia.24 Press notices that appeared in Canada also explained to “the enlightened colored people” of the twentieth century that the film “refers to no race of people of today.”25 Griffith did water down many of the more contentious episodes in Dixon’s novels. In the traditions of stage melodrama, the sequence in which the mixed-race carpetbagger Silas Lynch exhibits lust towards Elsie Stone, whom he wants to marry, implies that she awaits a “fate worse than death” until she is rescued by the hooded Clansmen (led by Ben Cameron).26

State-wide bans were enacted in Kansas and Ohio and in a number of cities including Minneapolis, Chicago, Cleveland, Gary, Providence, and Albuquerque. The mayor of Boston, where a coalition of blacks and whites challenged screening of the film, insisted on specific scenes being cut. Yet the larger campaign against Griffith’s film did not succeed, partly because of divisions within black communities. Although a failure in terms of its immediate goal, the NAACP campaign was useful in raising the organization’s national profile.27 On the other

23 Montreal Daily Star, February 5, 1916; Stokes, D. W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation, pp. 145-146. Griffith’s sympathy for the working class was revealed in Intolerance (1916), a film that almost provoked a Jewish boycott because of scenes depicting the crucifixion of Christ.


26 Lang, The Birth of a Nation, pp. 137-139.

27 Boston Globe, April 11, 1915; Paul Polgar, “Fighting Lightning with Fire: Black Boston’s Battle Against ‘The Birth of a Nation’,” Massachusetts Historical Review, vol. 10 (2008), pp. 84-113; Sullivan, Lift Every
hand, the success of *BON* helped spread the popularity of the second KKK, which started in Georgia in 1915 and spread to every state of the union. This organization, although drawing on the image and traditions of the original, was not only anti-black, but also anti-Catholic, anti-Jewish, anti-immigrant, and anti-radical. It was disavowed by a number of supporters of the first Klan, including Dixon and Griffith.\textsuperscript{28}

The reality for the NAACP was that most Northern whites, although possibly agreeing that Southern blacks should have the right to vote, rejected the social equality of the races and tended to accept Southern apologists’ assertion that there were “good” and “bad” blacks. Anti-black (and anti-immigrant) images were already prevalent in American cinema prior to 1915. During the 1910s and 1920s, partly in response to the first great migration of Southern blacks to the North and West, racial tensions in those regions, with riots and segregation in the job market and housing (the latter backed by restrictive covenants), were on the rise. Although popular movies such as *The Birth of a Nation* were powerful forces for “teaching” history to the public, their messages were neither original nor extreme in the context of the day. Fears of miscegenation and male black sexuality, for example, were strong forces in the South, resisting the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s.\textsuperscript{29}

Reactions to *BON* in Great Britain, according to Michael Hammond, were generally positive. Little awareness or discussion surfaced in British reviews of the film’s racial or historical controversies. A nation at war, conditioned by Allied propaganda newsreels and feature films, thrilled to the battle and action scenes.\textsuperscript{30} In the spring of 1916, Queen Mary and four of her children as well as other celebrity royals such as the King and Queen of Portugal attended a special screening of *The Birth of a Nation* at London’s Drury Lane Theatre. Griffith’s agent donated the proceeds to the War Workers Fund.\textsuperscript{31} Griffith visited Britain and toured the front lines in France. Despite America’s neutrality, Britain was so welcoming of Griffith that he was asked to produce a propaganda film. The request was ironic, given that he had thought of *BON* as an anti-war film and continued to criticize war in his three-and-a-half-hour epic *Intolerance* (1916). On the other hand, Griffith in 1916 produced a sequel to *BON*, *The Fall of a Nation*, with an anti-isolationist, pro-preparedness message. The British project, released in 1918, was *Hearts of the World*, advertised as a “romance” that depicted a French village under brutal German occupation. Including scenes shot in France and England, the movie, which starred Lillian and Dorothy Gish, was mainly filmed in California.\textsuperscript{32}

*The Birth of a Nation* may have reached a global audience of 200 million. Richard Schickel has concluded that it was “offensive to much of the world wide


\textsuperscript{29} Briley, “Hollywood’s Reconstruction.”

\textsuperscript{30} Michael Hammond, “‘A Soul Stirring Appeal to Every Briton’: The Reception of *The Birth of a Nation* in Britain,” *Film History*, vol. 11, no. 3 (1999), pp. 353-370.

\textsuperscript{31} *Amherst Daily News*, April 26, 1916.

\textsuperscript{32} Hammond, “‘A Soul Stirring Appeal’,” pp. 359-360.
audience,” but Melvyn Stokes disagrees. One exception, investigated by Stokes, was the ban in France against the movie instituted in 1916 and again in 1923. One of the principal reasons behind the first ban, which lasted for six years, was fear of provoking the growing population of African immigrants in Paris. The 1923 ban was influenced by fears that American tourists were importing their racial prejudices into France.

Wartime Canada’s Reactions to Race

Canadian blacks lacked a national advocacy organization such as the NAACP, a situation that guaranteed that organized protest against Griffith’s film would be diffused. Other than some arrivals from the West Indies, the Dominion had received little in the way of black immigration since before the Civil War, and many black Canadians, like other Canadians, had departed for the United States. Nationally the black population stagnated between 1901 and 1921. In the six cities discussed here, African Canadians in 1911 were small minorities, ranging from a high of 2 per cent of the population in Halifax to a low of 0.2 per cent in Toronto. West of Ontario, they tended to be outnumbered by other visible minorities; in Vancouver in 1911 for example, the Chinese, Japanese, and “Hindus” outnumbered blacks by more than 40 to one. Although African Canadians during World War I were limited in number and dispersed, they did share one important characteristic: they were overwhelmingly descended from Afro-American slaves. This made the issues raised in *The Birth of a Nation*, specifically whether blacks could be fully trusted as responsible, productive citizens, of more than passing interest.

Griffith’s movie was released in major Canadian cities in late 1915. Despite Canada’s supposed anti-American nationalism, aversion to vigilante violence, and negative views of American race relations, the movie generated little controversy. Protests among the black communities of Toronto and Montreal and in smaller cities such as St. Catharines and Saint John could not offset the general public’s curiosity about Griffith’s artistic and technical accomplishments. One of the reasons the film was so popular north of the border was that its views of American Reconstruction and the inferior nature of blacks were not controversial. This attitude was reflected in many spheres of society, including Canada’s immigration policy, which attempted to avoid America’s race problem by excluding blacks on the grounds that they were “unsuitable citizens.”

35 Canada, *Census of Canada, 1911*, vol. 2 (Ottawa: King’s Printer, 1912), Table VII, “Origins of the People by Sub-districts.” According to many historians, census enumeration tended to undercount minorities such as blacks.
36 *Census of Canada, 1911*, vol. 2, Table VII.
administrative barriers at Canada’s borders, especially after 1910; the Chinese, despite white hostility, were able to “buy” their way into the country by paying the head tax, as more than 5,000 did in 1914.\footnote{Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *The Canada Year Book 1920* (Ottawa: King’s Printer, 1921), p. 124.} The other reason had to do with the power of American cinema, the cult of celebrity, and the reaction of audiences and critics to Griffith’s artistic and technical achievements. Canadian newspapers included not only advertisements and promotional stories and interviews with prominent directors and actors such as Griffith, but also columns allegedly written by movie stars such as George Arliss and Mary Pickford. The industry was reaching out to women as consumers by stressing the glamour, gossip, and fashion of celebrity culture. Trade journals and fan magazines, and the emerging genre of film criticism, also helped build support for popular cinema. Press agents for motion pictures supplied their own promotional stories to local newspapers.\footnote{The Province [Vancouver], November 10, 1915; *Montreal Daily Star*, April 1, 4, and 8, 1916; Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, p. 123.}

The Great War for most English Canadians was viewed as a coming of age for the nation. Yet Canadians’ actual understanding of the war was distorted by patriotism and deliberate censorship of newspapers, magazines, movies, telegraphs, and photography.\footnote{Jeffrey A. Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship During Canada’s Great War* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1996).} With Canada involved in the war and America remaining neutral until 1917, the power of the New York film production industry was not without its critics in Canada. Patriotic Canadians were disturbed by American isolationism and hostility to British propaganda. Canada’s chief wartime censor, although lacking legislative authority, pressured provincial film censors to block American movies with pacifist or pro-German themes. Letters to newspapers complained about the prominent display of American flags in newsreels (for example, depicting American troops in Mexico in 1916) and movies exhibited in Canadian theatres and said that American newsreels ignored Canadian topics. This issue had surfaced as early as 1911, when Ontario audiences reacted negatively to frequent depictions of the Stars and Stripes in American movies. Similar complaints surfaced in British Columbia. A major merger in the American industry in 1916, the *Montreal Star* feared, would increase the economic and cultural power of American cinema.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 106-108; *Montreal Daily Star*, March 25 and April 1, 1916; Ian Jarvie, *Hollywood’s Overseas Campaign: The North Atlantic Movie Trade, 1920-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 50-53.}

In American motion picture circles, Canada was known to have fairly strict censorship criteria, similar to that of Great Britain. Social reformers such as the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, Protestant ministers, and the Catholic Church were the major advocates of censorship. Movies in Canada were censored depending on the circumstances; the most common reason, as in the United States, had to do with morality. Censorship often consisted of ordering offensive footage excised from exhibitions. Negative depictions of ethnic and racial minorities usually were uncontroversial. For example, the 1914 Cecil B. de Mille film *The Man from Home* was banned in Vancouver, and in 1915 Montreal prohibited
showings of the sex hygiene drama *Damaged Goods* on the grounds that it was “monstrous and obscene.”44 Censors made an exception to overlooking racial issues in the case of motion pictures of boxing matches that involved blacks, such as the 1915 Johnson-Willard fight staged in Havana.45 Concern over moral issues inspired maternal feminists to lobby for the appointment of women to provincial censor boards. Scenes of looting, arson, seduction, political assassination, implied rapes, murders, brutal battles, and rigged elections made *The Birth of a Nation* a potential candidate for censorship. Films also were censored for political or diplomatic reasons. The newspapers and magazines published by William Randolph Hearst raised British ire by appearing to support Germany and the 1916 Irish Rebellion. In 1917 the Canadian authorities banned Hearst’s serial movie *Patria*, which depicted a Japanese plot against and invasion of America (Japan at the time was an ally of Canada and Great Britain). In the British Commonwealth, Hearst and his newspapers, magazines, and newsreels were viewed as pro-German and anti-British. In late 1917 Canada banned Hearst media from using its telegraph cables and mails.46 As Jeffrey Keshen notes, even British propaganda movies such as *The Battle of the Somme* and Griffith’s *Hearts of the World* were too realistic, for Canada’s chief censor, in their depictions of death and violence.47

In Vancouver, as in British Columbia as a whole, the racial divide tended to pit whites against Asian minorities such as the Chinese and Japanese or migrants from India. Although blacks were a small percentage of the visible minority population (the 1911 census listed only 166 in the city of Vancouver), they suffered from the same types of discrimination as in other Canadian cities, and, especially in the case of Americans, were identified with crime and prostitution.48 They were also denigrated in the press and in popular culture manifestations such as blackface minstrel shows. In early 1916, for example, the Canadian Club and Women’s Canadian Club sponsored a charity minstrel show at the Orpheum Theatre on behalf of the Returned Soldiers Fund. A “coon band orchestra” backed the amateur performers.49 *BON* premiered in Vancouver at the Avenue Theatre on Christmas Day, 1915. Reviews, predictably, were positive. The audience, exposed to suspense, humour, and pathos, reportedly was “carried away with emotion.” Griffith’s pacifist message did not offend wartime Vancouver audiences. One review complimented the director’s technical mastery and attention to detail, which, as the publicity machine explained, had been supported by extensive

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44 *The Province* [Vancouver], December 29, 1915; *Montreal Daily Star*, December 30, 1915; *Toronto Daily Star*, October 1 and 5, 1915.
45 *Toronto Globe*, October 19 and 25, 1915. For reactions to films of Jack Johnson’s 1908-1910 victories over white boxers, see Dray, *At the Hands*, chap. 7.
historical research. Lincoln’s assassination was recreated in a studio set that replicated Ford’s Theatre, and actor Raoul Walsh had leapt exactly the same distance to the stage as did assassin John Wilkes Booth in 1865. According to the 1911 census, there were only 200 blacks in the entire province of Manitoba. In this pluralistic society “race” was often understood on the basis of ethnic hierarchy that privileged Anglo-Celtic citizens over European “foreigners.” Winnipeg’s black community (fewer than 170 in a city of 39,000 in 1911) existed in a larger context of economic and social exclusion. Like black Canadians elsewhere, they were exposed to patriotic messages and images calling on the citizenry to make sacrifices for the war effort. Such propaganda sometimes pushed the boundaries of public decorum. A recruitment poster for the 190th Battalion, for example, depicted German troops sexually assaulting a woman, shooting a man and boy, and bayoneting a young girl. The images were based on evidence collected by James Bryce on German atrocities in Belgium and incorporated in an influential report in 1915. Ironically, these sensationalist Canadian propaganda messages paralleled the racist warnings in Dixon novels and Griffith’s film: in both cases a malevolent “other” threatened the sexual purity of the nation’s mothers, sisters, and daughters. Advertisements warned that, if Germany won the war, Canada would become a German colony; German soldiers would inflict mass rape on the nation’s women and prevent Canadians from speaking English in their own homes. In Manitoba, as elsewhere, white males were being shamed into volunteering for the army, and in cities such as Calgary patriotic women joined military drill squads. Patriotic black Canadian men, in contrast, generally were denied the right to enlist in the armed forces. Winnipeg residents were reminded of a recent British review that praised BON as an important history lesson, especially for Britons who were not familiar with the American Civil War or the Reconstruction era, when “negroes whose grandfathers were naked savages in Africa were placed in authority over the stricken South.” When the film returned to Winnipeg in March 1916, the Winnipeg Free Press quoted a clergyman who extolled its educational value and described the KKK as a symbol of “an unconquered race.”

Ontario was home to several thousand blacks, most of whom did not live in the province’s major city. Border communities such as Chatham and Windsor, with historic ties with pre-Civil War escaped slaves, retained significant black populations. Toronto’s, in 1911, was relatively small and employed in occupations such as labourer, teamster, barber, waiter, and domestic. Yet it was large enough to enjoy an associational life. BON opened at Toronto’s Alexandria Theatre in

50 The Province [Vancouver], December 27, 1915.
51 Census of Canada, 1911, vol. 2, Table VII. For “degrees of whiteness” in neighbouring Alberta, see Kelly and Wossen-Taffessee, “The Black Canadian.”
53 Vancouver Sun, January 3, 1916.
54 Winnipeg Free Press, March 16, 1916. The line was taken from an intertitle card that referred to the Scots as an unconquered race.
September of 1915. A report from the middle of the month claimed that the city’s “coloured” population was “incensed” at the prospect of the film being displayed because it depicted the Negro in an uncomplimentary fashion. The protestors vowed to lobby members of the provincial parliament as well as the premier. The effort did not succeed. E. R. Parkhurst, a regular theatre and movie critic for the *Globe*, noted that, because of controversies, the film had attracted considerable attention indicated by healthy advanced ticket sales. Its initial one-week run was extended. The *Globe* also noted that the movie was attracting a diverse audience. Like many critics and journalists, Parkhurst regarded *BON* as a new art form. Publicity continued to stress the movie’s “truthful” historical narrative: “it records facts with the rapidity of lightning.” The movie continued its Toronto run in December at Massey Hall. One publicity piece from Toronto reminded the public that the film included “Ben Cameron, the gallant Clansman of the Dixon stories,” and explained that the story concluded with “the final union of the North and South in bonds of love and peace.”

In most cities examined here, reporting on and reviews of Griffith’s epic were overwhelmingly positive; the *Montreal Daily Mail* described it as “Several Thousand Feet of Education.” Montreal movie-goers in this era were treated to mainstream American films, British commercial films such as *The White Feather*, and Allied propaganda movies such as *Le guerre en France* and *Britain Prepared*, which were exhibited in 1915 and 1916. The former, also released in English, advertised “The War Just As It Is,” with scenes from France, Serbia, Russia, and the Dardanelles. *Britain Prepared*, which included scenes of the Royal Navy, was a large-scale production designed to boost morale and to reassure allied as well as neutral nations of Britain’s determination to fight. Imitating *BON*’s presentation, the propaganda film had its own special musical arrangement performed by a large orchestra. In Western Canada, the Pantages theatre chain displayed *Soldiers of the King* and *Defenders of the Empire* in aid of the war effort. Another British war film exhibited in Canada was *The Battle of the Somme* (1916), which depicted infantrymen being shot in battle and the corpses of dead soldiers on the battlefield. These films blended the newsreel format with the techniques of narrative cinema. Canada’s first foray into cinematic propaganda, *Canada’s Fighting Forces*, displayed the Canadian Expeditionary Force and toured the country in 1916. Canadians’ direct experience of the war was usually limited to watching volunteers march off to distant battle; cinema, both fictional and documentary, changed this dynamic. At least one Canadian review drew comparisons between Griffith’s film

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56 *The Globe* [Toronto], September 15 and 20, 1915.
57 *The Globe* [Toronto], September 18 and 23, 1915.
58 *The Globe* [Toronto], September 16 and December 11, 1915.
59 *The Globe* [Toronto], September 18, 1915.
and Britain Prepared, suggesting that, for filmmakers and audiences, wartime blurred the line between fictional and documentary movies.53

Montreal blacks, most of whom were Anglophones from the United States, the Maritime provinces, or the West Indies, were considered outsiders by the city’s dominant French-Canadian culture. The North American movie house supposedly was a welcoming space for women, children, and immigrants, but in Montreal, as in other Canadian cities, theatres were contested spaces for black Canadians. In 1918 a black man denied seating in the balcony at Lowe’s Montreal Theatre appealed to the courts. In 1921 an appeal court ruled that the theatre had a legal right to discriminate in the seating of patrons.64 In 1917, shortly after the BON controversy, the Coloured Political and Protective Association was established to promote “racial advancement.” It was followed by a branch of Marcus Garvey’s black nationalist Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which promoted racial pride and rejected the moderate agenda of Booker T. Washington and the integrationist approach of the NAACP.65

In Montreal, advertising and newspaper entertainment sections dealing with BON often downplayed the KKK or race issues. Instead they featured iconic images of President Lincoln or Robert E. Lee or love or family scenes involving one or both of the white protagonist families, the Stonemans and the Camerons, whose sons had met at boarding school (see Figure 1). Griffith’s love story subplots and “last-minute rescue plot of victimized womanhood” were designed to attract female patrons.66 As in other Canadian cities, most newspaper coverage in Montreal consisted of copy produced by official press agents, much of it written with an American audience in mind. One of Griffith’s tactics in defusing opposition in the United States was to stage private or gala showings for members of the political and economic elite and their spouses. Federal opposition leader Wilfrid Laurier as well as the governor general and his spouse viewed the film. The Quebec Chronicle noted that the wife of the province’s lieutenant governor attended a premiere in Quebec City and enjoyed it so much that she vowed to return with her husband.67

BON was scheduled to open in Montreal’s Princess Theatre in late September 1915. At a meeting at the Union Congregational Church on September 23, local blacks passed a resolution denouncing Griffith’s work. Organized in 1907 by American railway porters and their wives who felt excluded from mainstream churches, this congregation, which joined the United Church of Canada in 1925, was a major organizational force for the black community. That evening a fire damaged the Princess Theatre, destroying the roof, the top gallery, and some

66 Hansen, Babel and Babylon, p. 225.
The police began an investigation on the assumption that the fire had been purposefully set by someone opposed to *The Birth of a Nation*.

The film played with French and English titles at the St. Denis Theatre in November.

It returned in May to slightly smaller crowds but continued positive reviews.

S. Morgan-Powell defended the movie’s high ticket prices on the grounds that audiences were exposed to important history, a “coherent narrative,” and intense drama and “psychological force.”

Provincial censors normally reviewed hundreds of movies in a year and passed most of them. According to the *Montreal Star*, the censorship board only intervened in cases in which morality was offended, organized religion and the clergy were defamed, or suicide or divorce was portrayed. *The Birth of a Nation* passed the Quebec censors, who, according to the *Ottawa Citizen*, refused to cut “the awful Gus scene,” in which a black male chases young Flora Cameron, intending on marrying her. Flora ends up leaping from a cliff to her death, and KKK vigilantes (“the Invisible Empire”) commanded by Ben Cameron later seize Gus and put

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68 *The Globe* [Toronto], September 24, 1915.

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**Figure 1:** Advertisement for *The Birth of a Nation* (Source: *Montreal Star*, April 29, 1916).
him on trial. An editorial in the same journal questioned why Quebec censors had banned the English film *The Eternal City*, which dealt with the Vatican, but permitted *The Birth of a Nation*, which was based on a historically inaccurate novel and was a “cruel injustice to the negro race.” A review of *BON* in the *Citizen* praised its artistry and technical achievements but concluded that it fanned the “spirit of old race hatreds.” When *The Birth of a Nation* returned to Montreal for a showing in the spring of 1916, controversy continued.

As in the United States, not all spokespersons for the black community condemned the film outright. Reverend C. A. Stewart of Montreal’s African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church approved of the “Hampton epilogue,” noting that the Virginia school was touring films in the mid-west under the banner “Making Negro Lives Sound” and that Griffith’s movie had aided fund-raising and publicity. The scenes of industrial training and “clean, attractive Christian homes” contrasted with “shabby cabins and ramshackle outbuildings, ill-kept fields with pigs, chickens and ragged children galore” and “street scenes with many loafing negroes.” These comments echoed the self-help approach of Booker T. Washington, with its emphasis on education, hygiene, and uplift. Stewart contrasted the inflammatory novel *The Clansman* with Griffith’s more nuanced creation and reminded his readers that Canada, experiencing “the most important crisis in the history of the world,” required social harmony. The reverend went so far as to suggest that *The Birth of a Nation* showed that blacks were superior to whites, as the “worst character” in the drama was Northern abolitionist politician Austin Stoneman, who was characterized by depravity and duplicity. Stewart also praised the “faithfulness, resourcefulness and constancy” of the “Mammy” house servant, “a true negro woman.” The established maternal but comic Mammy character, who reappears in *Gone with the Wind*, is loyal to the Camerons to the point of physically assaulting blacks who insult the honour of her master’s family and subduing two black Union soldiers. An intertitle card refers to Mammy and the trusted older male house slave as “faithful souls.” In the words of David Pilgrim, the Mammy figure represents an ideal of the imaginary South, a slave who “did not want to be free.” The analysis of Stewart, who was eager to find any positive image of blacks in the movie, indicates that multiple readings of *The Birth of a Nation* were possible even among black communities.

Griffith’s film aroused special concern in Nova Scotia, home to several thousand blacks. In addition to Halifax County, cities such as Amherst, Truro, and Sydney and parts of rural Nova Scotia had viable black populations. In industrial Cape Breton hundreds of blacks, many of them West Indians, were employed

72 *Ottawa Citizen*, October 6, 1915. In *The Clansman* Gus rapes Marion Lenoir, a childhood sweetheart of Ben Cameron, who together with her mother commits suicide. Gus is then executed by the Clansmen. The movie did not depict the actual death of Gus, only his body being left on the doorstep of the “mulatto” state lieutenant governor’s residence.

73 *Ottawa Citizen*, October 6 and November 23, 1915.


75 *Montreal Gazette*, October 5, 1915.


77 For this point, see Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies*, chap. 2.
in coal mining.\textsuperscript{78} In Halifax, a delegation of white and black leaders lobbied the provincial government to have the film banned as a threat to public order. The American film, they argued, “was not in the best interests of the coloured citizens, nor of the citizens in general.” This instance was one of the few in Canada in which white allies supported black Canadian efforts to block Griffith’s movie. The reasons seem to have been largely pragmatic: Halifax was a garrison city, naval base and centre for Allied supply where the press, by 1916, was heavily promoting enlistment into the armed forces. The area also contained one of the largest black populations in Canada. In 1916 Nova Scotia blacks were being asked to join a construction battalion for overseas service. Research on newspapers published in Halifax, Cape Breton, and Amherst suggests that \textit{The Birth of a Nation} was not shown in Nova Scotia in 1915 or 1916. The president of the Halifax Academy of Music voluntarily agreed not to exhibit the film, despite assurances by an agent that it had been exhibited in other cities without incident. The provincial film censor travelled to Moncton, New Brunswick, to view the film before making his decision.\textsuperscript{79}

New Brunswick’s black population, like that of Nova Scotia, was mainly descended from black Loyalists and so-called “Refugees,” Southern slaves liberated by the British during the War of 1812. The black Canadian population was relatively smaller than in Nova Scotia, with fewer than 400 blacks in Saint John County.\textsuperscript{80} Provincial movie censors, in contrast to their counterparts in Nova Scotia, approved the film, but not without controversy. One of the most articulate protests against the movie in Canada developed in Saint John, where organized community life for black Canadians revolved around St. Philips AME Church, located in the South end. The newspapers of the day carried notices and reports of normal church activities such as sermons, concerts, and fundraisers. St. Philips had a broader self-help and advocacy role, however: to encourage and instil pride in members of an underprivileged minority.\textsuperscript{81} As in other Canadian cities in the 1910s, blacks were often denied entrance to theatres and other facilities. In March 1916 the chair of the New Brunswick Board of Film censors viewed \textit{The Birth of a Nation} and approved it. The usual publicity campaign began, and advanced sales opened for the “photoplay’s” upcoming run at the Opera House on Union Street. Prepared stories explained that the exhibition would feature 20 musicians, two special projectors, and machines for making sound effects. The management promised a “non-flickering picture” that would not strain the eyes. Advertising also attempted to counter rumours that the movie might not be shown.\textsuperscript{82}

\textsuperscript{78} \textit{Census of Canada, 1911}, vol. 2, Table VII. In 1911 blacks were 1.3 per cent of the province’s population.


\textsuperscript{80} \textit{Census of Canada, 1911}, vol. 2, Table VII.

\textsuperscript{81} For the importance of religious leaders and churches for the Maritime black community, see Harvey Amani Whitfield, \textit{Blacks on the Border: The Black Refugees in British North America,1815-1860} (Burlington: University of Vermont Press, 2006) and “The Struggle Over Slavery in the Maritime Colonies,” \textit{Acadiensis}, vol. 41, no. 2 (Summer/Autumn 2012), p. 44.

\textsuperscript{82} \textit{Saint John Globe}, April 15 and 17, 1916.
Saint John’s black community began to express concerns in late March; several meetings were held to discuss the problem. Participants expressed the fear that BON might arouse racial feeling and discredit the Negro race. Reverend J. H. Franklin of St. Philips, who had lived in Georgia and had experienced Southern racial oppression, led the effort (the AME church was headquartered in the United States and much of its clergy was American). A meeting at St. Philips in early April and attended by nearly 100, which approximated most of the adult black population in Saint John County, resulted in a direct appeal to Mayor J. H. Frink and the civic commissioners to consider the approach taken in Denver, Colorado. In a letter to the Globe, Franklin mentioned the film’s possible impact on white people, with whom the black population had amiable relations. The protestors wished that the film would be banned or that censors would cut the two contentious scenes: the “Gus scene” and a depiction of black politicians drinking and misbehaving in the South Carolina legislature. In the latter scene—“The Riot in the Master’s Hall”—uncouth black legislators are eating chicken, drinking alcohol, taking off their boots, and gazing lustily at white women in the visitors’ gallery. Franklin’s mention of drink reflected the importance of temperance to contemporary discourses on respectability; New Brunswick was in the process of enacting provincial prohibition legislation. Franklin appealed to the unity of the “Loyalist city” and British fair play, reminding readers that BON was a “Southern production.” Most black citizens, like their white brethren, he asserted, were law-abiding; black Canadians simply wanted “a chance to make something of themselves.” In a subsequent letter to the Standard, Franklin argued that any positive history lessons of the film were ruined by its unrealistic treatment of racial issues; he identified the personal biases of Griffith and especially Dixon (“a human devil of the erudite category”). He appealed to how the French and the English, in contrast to the Americans, had supposedly treated the black race. Blacks depicted in the film, furthermore, were poor, uneducated, and possibly mentally deficient; these problems, as contemporary social reformers pointed out, were not confined to one race. He warned in closing that The Birth of a Nation was a form of “poison” that would infect the Maritime provinces at a critical time in their history.

At a meeting held at St. James Hall on April 12, 1916, a new group, the Negro Protective Association, endorsed earlier protests against the film. Normally there were no appeals of censor board rulings. Franklin had been in touch with the provincial authorities and they responded. Attorney General J. B. M. Baxter, who was a member of the legislative assembly for Saint John, together with the board of censors and Reverend Franklin and his legal counsel, viewed the film at the Opera House. Franklin asked that some cuts be made. The provincial government’s censoring of movies had been under attack by the opposition as too lax; critics deemed depictions of violence, drinking, and other anti-social activities as harmful to children. Despite the formal protest, the board decided to

84 St. John Standard, April 1916.
pass Griffith’s film without cuts, and it played that evening. Franklin’s reaction was not recorded. In a story that echoed events in Montreal, the press reported that, shortly after the film began its run, the manager and stage manager allegedly witnessed two black men attempting to break into the Opera House at 3:30 am. The police were called, but the men fled.

The Saint John protest had appealed to British toleration and Canadian nationalism at a time when black leaders were frustrated that black Canadians were being denied the right to serve the nation and Empire. Able-bodied white males, in contrast, were accused of cowardice, selfishness, dishonour, and even effeminacy for not volunteering, and recruiting efforts were relentless. Despite a civilian and military labour shortage by 1915, recruiting officers were discouraged from allowing blacks to join. In contrast, small numbers of non-citizens, such as Chinese and Japanese Canadians and Status Indians, served in the volunteer army. Given the emotional content of wartime patriotism and propaganda, this was a denial of not only citizenship but also “manhood” or masculinity. Black men were eager to serve, and black women also contributed to war-related charities. Eventually, pressure from black communities in Saint John, Halifax, and elsewhere forced the Canadian government to compromise and authorize the No. 2 Construction Battalion, in which a number of Saint John men served (see Figure 2). More than half of the men who volunteered for this non-combat unit hailed from the Maritimes, mainly Nova Scotia. In the United States, where segregation was more institutionalized and protected by the courts, 200,000 blacks were recruited to serve overseas, most in labour/construction battalions. Thousands experienced combat, however, and 171 were officially recognized for gallantry by the government of France. In one of his letters to the press, Franklin mentioned that the local recruiting committee had refused 20 black men who had volunteered to serve King and country.

There were few original reviews of BON in Saint John newspapers. Alice Fairweather declared Griffith’s production “wonderful and indescribable.” She stressed the realism of “the play,” notably the scenes depicting the death of Lincoln. She reported that the love stories were tender, the action scenes thrilling, and the sequences involving the heroes (the KKK) “unforgettable.” Fairweather did not challenge the film’s depiction of pre-Civil War “servants” as faithful and postwar free blacks as “unprepared for freedom,” but she did credit blacks with self-improvement and reminded her readers that Dixon’s novel was strongly pro-Southern. An unsigned review in the Telegraph judged the film a “triumph of the

87 Saint John Globe, April 19, 1916.
90 St. John Standard, April 18, 1916.
art,” “something more than a moving picture.” Echoing Griffith’s personal views in 1914 and 1915, the review highlighted the movie’s pacifist messages on the horrors of war. It accepted the common historical understanding that Lincoln’s untimely death led to mistaken policies and a “race war” in the South. On the other hand, the movie “proved” that American blacks had progressed tremendously since the 1870s. Depictions of violence between whites and blacks on so large a scale, according to the review, had never been witnessed on film screens in New Brunswick. Scenes included depictions of blacks intimidating, looting, beating, and shooting whites and gun battles between black soldiers and Clansmen. The reviewer agreed that *The Birth of a Nation* had educational value, but cautioned that some scenes were exaggerated for dramatic effect and reminded readers that that in the era depicted “racial feeling ran high.”

91 *Daily Telegraph* [Saint John], April 18, 1916.
Conclusion

*The Birth of a Nation*, which would become the most discussed film of the silent era, remained a subject of public attention. Protests and censorship disputes in the United States continued, especially as lynching persisted in the South and as the KKK expanded in all regions of America. In 1922 the NAACP, two New York aldermen, and a state senator appeared before the state motion picture commission to protest a revival of the movie in conjunction with a KKK recruiting drive. It was reissued in 1930 with a synchronized sound track and orchestral track. A prologue featured Griffith in discussion with actor Walter Huston, who played the lead in that year’s *Abraham Lincoln*, directed by Griffith (and who spoke of “the great Ku Klux Klan”). The re-issue, which was not a commercial success, was opposed by the NAACP and other African American organizations and banned in Detroit and several other cities. Kansas and Ohio reinstated their state-wide bans.

*The Birth of a Nation* and other films of the silent era were part of the globalization of American culture. For the most part Canada was a willing participant in this process. Much like the issue of recruiting minorities into the military, the failure of whites to speak out against Griffith’s racially charged film confirmed for Canada’s blacks that they were not full citizens, despite their formal legal equality. There was also an important gender message inherent in the interplay of popular culture, racial attitudes, and military policy. Canada’s white “manhood” was expected to make sacrifices for the Dominion, the Empire, and, ultimately, the protection of white womanhood. Exhorted to support a war for democracy, black males were treated in military policy as a divisive, alien minority and in popular culture as a threat to the sexual purity of the white race. Denied the obligations of citizenship, they nonetheless appealed to a universal Canadian citizenship, British traditions, and the war effort in an attempt to secure “fair play.” Framed within a Canadian context that incorporated toleration for minorities, British constitutionalism, and suspicion of the United States, the protests in Toronto, Montreal, Saint John, and Halifax echoed the emerging equal rights of the NAACP more than the accommodationist approach of Booker T. Washington. Only after the war, with the proliferation of Marcus Garvey’s more militant UNIA, did Canada’s black population adopt more of a militant stance against racial prejudice and imperialism. Between 1919 and 1932 the UNIA organized 32 divisions and enrolled up to 5,000 members, roughly one-quarter of the nation’s black population. Despite its achievements, the UNIA mainly represented West Indian immigrants and was opposed by the more middle-class Canadian League for the Advancement of Colored People, founded in the mid-1920s.

The organization whose growth in part depended on the success of *The Birth of a Nation*, the KKK, spread into regions of Canada, notably Ontario, New Brunswick, and especially Saskatchewan during the 1920s. Although blacks (such as in Ontario) were threatened by this new organization, its popularity owed more to nativism and anti-Catholicism than any backlash against Canada’s small black population. Elites in Ontario disapproved of the “new” Klan because of its violent American associations, not, in the opinion of legal historian Constance Backhouse, because of its racial attitudes. The popular and relatively moderate KKK helped defeat the ruling Liberal party in Saskatchewan in 1928 by appealing to protecting “British” society from Catholics and foreigners.96

The acceptable racism reflected in Griffith’s popular film was not challenged directly in Canadian public policy until the 1940s and 1950s. Even then, human rights initiatives such as Ontario’s fair accommodations legislation were resisted on the local level, and black Canadians continued to face discrimination in hotels, restaurants, bars, and barber shops. In motion pictures, radio programmes, and comic strips of the interwar period, African Americans were depicted as servants or comic relief. Often they were simply ignored. On the rare occasion, then, when Hollywood dared address real social issues such as lynching, screenwriters’ scripts were often watered down to make them less controversial. In 1939, Canadians flocked to *Gone With the Wind*, the film based on Margaret Mitchell’s novel. Mitchell herself was a fan of Thomas Dixon. Though the novels and plays of the 1930s and 1940s, as well as the youth-oriented pop and rock music of the 1950s, began to break down racial barriers, the American popular culture of the 1960s and 1970s, which was also predominant in Canada, continued to stereotype, if not exclude, persons of colour.97

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