READING RACISM:
RACE AND PRIVILEGE IN YOUNG ADULT FICTION

by

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Abstract

The novel Bifocal, a fictional young adult novel that examines the racist backlash that occurs at a high school after a male Muslim student is arrested on terrorism charges, was published in 2007 and has received wide critical acclaim for its portrayal of issues of racism. Working from an anti-racist framework, this research interviews two teachers who have used the novel in their classrooms, and considers the value and limitations of the book as an anti-racist teaching tool. Through discussions about specific themes in the novel and its overall presentation of racism, I argue that, while Bifocal presents some useful interventions, it also reflects a simplistic and individualistic perspective on racism and how racism can be addressed. I also examine the ways that Bifocal – and young adult literature in general – can be read in order to encourage more critical discussions about systems of racism and privilege.
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INTRODUCTION

The novel Bifocal, co-written by Canadian children’s authors Deborah Ellis and Eric Walters, was published in 2007. A fictional story based on the arrests of the “Toronto 18,” a group of young Muslim men arrested in June 2006 on charges related to terrorism, Bifocal examines the racist backlash that occurs at a high school after a student is arrested. The novel received glowing reviews in Canadian media sources (see, for example, Gordon, 2007 and Curtis, 2007), and at least one Toronto teacher made plans to use Bifocal in her English class before the book had even been widely published (Gordon, 2007, para. 11). Described by one reviewer as a “powerful and important book” that will “raise [questions] that are topical and urgently need to be addressed in our world today” (Doucet, 2007, para. 5), Bifocal has drawn attention as a novel that provokes discussions about racism and Islamophobia that are necessary and pertinent in a contemporary Canadian socio-political context. The timeliness of its topic and the wide praise that it has received mean that it is important to analyse further the kinds of messages that it presents and conversations that it creates. Through this, we can learn about the potential opportunities and risks involved with using young adult literature to talk about race and racism.

My own initial response was to be impressed by Bifocal’s bluntness in admitting that racism does, in fact, exist in Canadian society, frustrated as I was with constant images celebrating Canada’s diversity and supposed tolerance, and conversations with people who told me that racism was really only a problem in the United States (and, according to one woman I knew, mainly committed by people of colour against each other.) The novel suggested that not only were racist slurs alive and well in Canadian
communities, but also that institutions ranging from media to law enforcement could also commit, and contribute to, both interpersonal and systemic racism. I saw one character’s silence in the face of his friends’ racist comments as symbolic of the silence of many white Canadians who prefer to remain quiet and not shake things up when in similar situations, and wondered what the novel’s readers might learn about their own complicity in systems of oppression. I was glad to see a female Muslim character whose clothing choices were articulated as an act of resistance and not of submission to male authority.

These moments of optimism, of hope that the book could be doing more than the average “multicultural” children’s novel to actively address issues of racism, never entirely evaporated, but were soon joined with serious feelings of doubt and resignation, realisations that the book contained other elements that significantly undermined its more potentially transformative aspects. Its message about complicity was diminished by an ultimate all-too-easy redemption, and it was questionable to what degree the “us” and “them” binary was truly broken. While some of the personal changes may have seemed inspiring, the lack of any systemic change created an overly naïve impression of the deeply entrenched nature of racism in Canadian communities. In fact, Bifocal had a comparable effect on me as the movie Crash had on Shujah (2008), who writes that, despite her original feeling of being “drawn to the frankness with which race seemed to be presented,” she came to find that her “focus on how individuals can change […] was distracting [her] from considering how society needs to change” (p. 148).

Does this mean that Bifocal should never be read, or used in classrooms? Not necessarily; after all, if it were the case that all novels that do not present a perfect analysis of race and racism should be banned from young adult reading lists, there would
not be much left to read. At the same time, the contradictory messages contained within it point to a need to be deeply and critically engaged with, and aware of, the impact that it has. This thesis represents an attempt to better understand both the positive and negative impacts that *Bifocal* can have as a novel that claims to address themes of racism and intolerance, and, by extension, to consider what would be needed for a young adult novel to engage with themes of racism (and/or other forms of oppression) in more effective, realistic, and responsible ways. Specifically, it looks at how these themes can be, and are being, addressed by white teachers in predominantly white classrooms, and the effects of the novel in raising conversations about racism among those who are privileged by systems of racial domination.

As a white Muslim Canadian woman, my motivation for this project comes from personal connections and not only from academic or political interest. My relationship to the novel is informed by my whiteness, which means that I can identify with many of the themes of privilege and complicity that I read from the novel, and by my Muslim faith and my connection to various Canadian Muslim communities, which have directed me towards examining and responding to representations of Muslims, particularly in Canadian media and popular culture. As a graduate student in Sociology and Equity Studies in Education, and as someone who, even in my mid-twenties, often reads young adult literature, I find it important to consider the ways that such literature can be used to address themes of oppression and to promote critical reflection and social justice activism.
The first chapter of this thesis situates my research within an anti-racist framework and within the current political context with regards to racism – and particularly racism against Muslims – in Canada. I examine the ways that Muslim identity is often positioned as outside of Canadian identity, in order to draw attention to the particular forms of racism that will be addressed in the research project, and also, more broadly, to provide some background to the presence and manifestations of systemic racism in a Canadian context. I proceed to explore writing on multicultural and anti-racist children’s literature, to examine the possible lessons and risks involved with such literature, as well as scholarship on critical literacy, reader response, and oppositional readings, as a way of pointing to the possibility for texts to be read in critical, anti-oppressive ways, despite elements that may be problematic in the texts themselves. Last, I spend some time reflecting on the concerns raised in Crash Politics and Antiracism: Interrogations of Liberal Race Discourse (Dei & Howard, 2008), a book that asks many of same questions about the movie Crash as I do about the novel Bifocal, in order to set the stage for the kind of critique that I hope to make in my own research.

The second chapter of this thesis introduces the novel Bifocal in more detail, beginning with a summary of the plot, and then moving to an analysis of some of the reactions to the book that arose in Canadian media and in publications that review young adult literature. I argue that the wide critical acclaim that the book received, including specific recommendations from several sources that the book should be used as an educational tool, make this analysis of its effects especially pertinent. I then introduce Jennifer and Hannah,¹ the teachers that I have interviewed as part of this research. Although the deeper considerations of their motivations will be discussed in later

¹ These names are both pseudonyms.
chapters, their backgrounds and general reflections on *Bifocal* are provided here in order to introduce the perspectives from which the book has been taught in their classrooms.

The third chapter looks in detail at four major themes that arise in *Bifocal*, reflecting on the novel’s own presentation of the themes, as well as the ways that these themes were received by Jennifer and Hannah, and by their students. First, I examine the book’s depictions of the racial profiling and intimidation tactics used by police officers against Haroon, one of the novel’s main protagonists. Next, I look at the silence of Jay, the other main protagonist, in the face of repeated explicit racist comments on the part of the captain of his football team. Third, I investigate the decision of Haroon’s twin sister to wear *niqab* and *abaya* as part of her response to the growing racism against Muslims in their community. Last, I discuss the ending of the book – in which Jay and Haroon become friends and sit together in the normally-segregated cafeteria – and the implications of this ending with relation to the novel’s message on how racism should be understood and what kinds of anti-racist actions are necessary.

The final chapter of this research steps back to look at the bigger picture of what *Bifocal* says (and does not say) about racism and Islamophobia, and about what this means for those who might read it or teach it. I examine the ways that it both disrupts and reinforces stereotypes and assumptions about Muslims and about mainstream (white) Canadian identity and culture. I reflect on the actions of students from both Jennifer’s and Hannah’s classes to combat racism and bullying in their own communities, as a possible example of a way that the lessons of *Bifocal* could be applied in the students’ lives. Finally, I question the overall message that *Bifocal* presents about racism and the responses that it advocates, critiquing in particular the absence of a sustained call for
attention to systemic levels of racism, and the suggestion that racism exists, and can be solved, primarily at an interpersonal level.

Perhaps most importantly, considering that this novel *is* being widely read, both inside and outside of classrooms, I ask, in my conclusion, how it might be taken up in ways that do foster systemic anti-racist critiques and responses, even despite the areas where the book itself might fall short. Drawing on a number of writers who have addressed similar issues, I propose strategies for how *Bifocal* might be read and taught in an anti-racist way, and the kinds of considerations that should be applied to similar literature.
CHAPTER ONE: LOCATING THE RESEARCH

While there are many angles from which a work like Bifocal can be studied, my focus here is to look at the novel from within an anti-racist framework, in order to understand its values and limitations as a tool for addressing racism in today’s Canadian political climate. By applying such a framework to my work, I acknowledge the pervasive existence of racism, and the need to actively fight against it in order to combat it; in other words, that there is a difference between being anti-racist and simply (supposedly) not racist. I also emphasise that racism and racial privilege are structural and systemic, deeply embedded in social institutions and systemic relations, and extending far beyond simple individual and interpersonal interactions. Responses to racial injustice, therefore, must also go beyond individual acts of “crossing borders” or “being a good person,” because such acts ignore the larger power structures in which actors are embedded and therefore present, at best, incomplete approaches, and at worst, harmful reactions that further entrench unequal power hierarchies by concealing their existence and impacts. Later in this chapter, I explore the implications of this framework in the specific context of anti-racist children’s literature, and the kinds of principles that an anti-racist framework demands.

Situating Islamophobia and racism in a Canadian context

It is important to set the stage with a discussion of current anti-Muslim racism happening in Canada, both as a way of talking about the racism itself and as a way of disrupting perceptions of Canada as a place where tolerance, acceptance and commitments to diversity always prevail, where racism (usually thought of in terms of
individual, interpersonal racist words or actions) is only ever an aberration. I locate this racism instead as deeply ingrained within historical and contemporary Canadian identity and institutions.

The existence of systemic racism in Canada, of course, is nothing new. Through a history of colonial exclusions, Canadian identity has always been unequally accessible to those who attempt to claim it; the “identity is defined by those who position themselves as ‘ordinary Canadians’ or Canadian-Canadians – as opposed to ‘ethnic’ or ‘multicultural Canadians’ – both referring to a category of unmarked, ‘non-ethnic,’ white Canadians” (Arat-Koç, 2005, p. 40; emphasis in original). Thobani (2007, p. 20) writes that this dichotomy has been, in fact, fundamental to the creation of national identity, asserting that “a national identity that is formed primarily in relation to that which it excludes remains tied to the excluded, and the excluded Other becomes the nation’s ‘double.’” Muslims, who often bear “the mantle of the allegedly unassimilable and undesirable immigrant,” (Isin & Siemiatycki, 2002, p. 192), become an integral part of this Otherness against which Canadianness is often defined.

With a rise in fears of a perceived threat posed by Muslims around the globe, both before and since September 11, 2001, the country has seen what Arat-Koç (2005, p. 32) describes as “a campaign to increasingly define Canadian identity along civilizational lines, as part of ‘Western civilization’ and in a ‘clash of civilizations’ framework.” In this process, Muslims are seen not only as outsiders, but also as potential threats, whether they come from outside of Canada’s borders or from within them (Isin & Siemiatycki, 2002, p. 192). Measures to control Canadian Muslim populations – including increased surveillance and arrests – are seen as necessary and justifiable, as they “[will] not affect
‘real’ or ‘ordinary Canadians,’ but only specifically targeted minorities” (Arat-Koç, 2005, p. 39). In a disturbing reference to parallels with the status of Jews in pre-World War II Germany, Razack (2008, p. 117) reminds us that “[we] should keep in mind the productive power of the idea of the foreigner and the unassimilable minority,” and that such ideas can have very serious effects for those who are not considered to fully belong.

This inequality of belonging leads to a climate where “on the one hand, original citizens whose values must be respected (and whose values, it goes without saying, are superior) and, on the other, foreigners whose alien values have the potential to contaminate the body politic and who must be purged” (Razack, 2008, p. 131). In this process, despite Canada’s claims of being a diverse and welcoming society, “[by] constantly signifying the White population as ‘Canadians’ and immigrants of colour as ‘others,’ by constantly stereotyping Third World immigrants as criminals, terrorists, and fundamentalists, the state manages to both manipulate and cancel its alleged dedication to multiculturalism” (Bannerji, 1997, p. 34). In many arenas, those marked as Muslim within Canada are coming up against a particular “rigidity of the newly configured boundaries of Canadian identity and the precariousness of national belonging and limited political citizenship for nonwhite minorities” (Arat-Koç, 2005, p. 33). Regardless of whatever nominal citizenship they hold, many Muslims find themselves in positions of accessing only “a fragile narrative of ‘Canadianness’” (Zine, 2006, p. 246), if at all. Although, as Hage (2000) argues, it may be possible for those constructed as outside of the nation to accumulate “national capital” and thus increase the perceived legitimacy of their claims to national belonging, “the very fact of this acquired capital being an accumulation leads to its devaluing relative to those who posit themselves to have
inherited it or to possess it innately without having to accumulate it” (p. 64). In other words, while the dichotomy between (white) “Canadian” and “Muslim” (of colour) is not always as black-and-white as these abstract theoretical discussions may portray it, there continues to exist a sense of naturalness about white, European-descended Canadians of Christian background that is not accessible for Canadians of colour.

Within this context, it is worth considering Jiwani’s description (2005, p. 51) of the importance of the role of the media in constructions of Canadian national identity, when she writes that “[i]n a nation whose geographic size is enormous and whose population lives on a miniscule percentage of the total land mass, the role of the national media assumes even greater import when considering issues of social cohesion and the construction of an imagined community.” Moreover, as Saeed argues (2007, p. 448), “[i]n relation to race and ethnicity, the media provides information where public knowledge is fragmentary.” Both of these scholars point to the role of the media as a source of information that serves a very political role in shaping national public opinion and understandings of exactly who can be included within the nation. This argument that national identity is formed largely through representations is relevant also for the context of the novel I am discussing in this research, as a cultural product that is nationally accessible and also has some potential to shape the way that national subjects view themselves. As Stewart (2008) argues, “children’s literature has the potential to convey a sense of nation” (p. 98). Mehre Khan (2007) links this specifically with representations of Muslims within the contemporary political context:

Arguably, Muslim subjects of the disaspora, regardless if they identify as secular, religious, feminist, or queer, have taken on a new and further stigmatized visibility post-9/11. How can students and teachers located in feminist classrooms, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, safely imagine Muslim bodies and
identities outside and within war propaganda, border security measures, hijacked airplanes, racial profiling, and jihad? (p. 318)

Khan’s question points to the risks of attempting to “imagine Muslim bodies and identities” given the extent to which these bodies have already been defined. We can also extrapolate from this the risks of examining (or of dodging the invitation to examine) white or non-Muslim Canadian identities and nationhood in relation to these representations.

The particular novel in question in this research is loosely based on the June 2006 arrests of young Canadian Muslim men known in the media as both the “Toronto 18” and the “Toronto 17.” The men, initially twelve adults and five who were under the age of 18 (another man was arrested later), were arrested on the night of June 2, 2006, and into the morning of June 3, by local Toronto-area police forces in partnership with the RCMP and federal agencies such as the Canada Border Services Agency and the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (Smolash, 2009, p. 754), under suspicion of plotting terrorist attacks in Canada. Since that time, charges have been dropped against several of the accused, and one has been convicted (Smolash, 2009, p. 754).

While many of the details of the accusations are still unclear – and questions about dubious evidence and even entrapment have been raised since the early days of the investigation (Molloy, 2009, p. 114) – one immediate result of the arrests was the suspicion cast on Muslim subjects in Canadian media. Countries of origin (such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia) and Islamic practices were referenced in media articles in connection with descriptions of the alleged threats posed by the accused (Smolash, 2009, p. 755), creating a context in which “citizens racialized as ‘Arab,’ ‘Muslim,’ or ‘South Asian’ signify potential threats, always at risk of being pushed to the edge of belonging in
moments of tension” (Smolash, 2009, p. 759). Although all of those arrested were Canadian citizens, media reports made distinct efforts to depict the men as “Canadian-born,” not allowing them to be seen as unqualified “Canadians” (Razack, 2008, p. 3; emphasis added). Physical violence against Muslims also resulted, with a mosque in Etobicoke being vandalised the night following the attacks (Molloy, 2009, p. 112). Along with representations of Muslim men as terrorists and violent threats to Canada, representations of Muslim women’s bodies were also highly circulated; “images of women supporters and family of the accused wearing clothing marked as ‘Muslim’ are displayed repeatedly, signifying as evidence of suspiciousness […] Women in ‘Muslim clothing’ become a signifier of deception and Otherness” (Smolash, 2009, p. 757).

Although the novel *Bifocal* does not contain any specific acknowledgement of the real-life arrests on which its story is based, it is clear from both its content and from the discussions of the authors’ motivations for writing it (Gordon, 2007) that its plot is closely linked to these events. In fact, author Eric Walters describes the plot as “straight out of the newspaper” (quoted in Gordon, 2007, para. 2), demonstrating not only the deliberate decision to tie the novel’s plot to real-life events, but also the influence of the media on popular understandings of the nature of the events themselves. This is significant because it demonstrates the influence of the kind of media narratives discussed by Smolash (2009) and Molloy (2009), and the extent that popular understandings of the case are closely linked to the media depictions of it. Media discourse analysis seems to be the focus of existing academic work related to the Toronto 18 arrests; while there is currently no academic work (to my knowledge) that has studied the kinds of reactions to the arrests that are described in *Bifocal*, the level of opinions that
were widely expressed and viewed as legitimate in the media indicate that the fictional responses to similar arrests, as depicted in *Bifocal*, may not be far off.

**Examining multicultural and anti-racist children’s literature**

The primary goal of this research is to understand the extent to which *Bifocal* can be understood as an anti-racist work of literature, and to consider what the implications of this may be, both for how *Bifocal* itself should be read, and for how we might understand other works of children’s literature that attempt to do similar things. Much of the research on this topic has been done in the United States, but is still highly relevant to this Canadian context.

Writing about the importance of having a body of children’s literature that reflects multiple cultural and ethnic backgrounds, Bishop (1992) makes the case that such diversity is needed both for children of colour and for white children:

> The potential benefits of having books about people of colour available for children who are members of those groups are obvious: a sense of belonging, improved self-concept, a transmission of the values of the home culture, a sense of their own history. But, equally important, are the potential benefits of such books for those children who are members of the dominant groups. They have always found their mirrors in children’s books, but because they have not found others presented [...] they have also been given an exaggerated sense of their own importance. (Bishop, 1992, p. 20)

Although much of Bishop’s writing focuses on the value of books that represent a variety of cultures, rather than on a systemic anti-racist critique of existing children’s and young adult literature (interestingly, when she delineates four different trends within the field of multicultural literature, only one of these specifically addresses issues of “racism and discrimination,” and the list of examples she provides for this category is noticeably shorter than for the other three [Bishop, 1992, p. 24]), her work points out the need for
literature to actively work to destabilise power hierarchies and to challenge the
supremacy of dominant experiences. Stewart (2008) has also written about the need for a
greater presence of non-dominant stories within children’s literature curricula.

Much more is needed, however, than a simple presence of these non-dominant
experiences within the literature; as Kumashiro (2000) argues, “changing oppression
requires disruptive knowledge, not simply more knowledge” (p. 34; emphasis added).

Stan proposes that:

The ‘international’ books presented to American children are only a small taste of
children’s literature worldwide, and sometimes a pre-processed one at that. Most
of the children’s literature from outside our borders comes from places with
people who see the world much as we do and is then edited to conform even
more strictly to our worldview. ‘Not ours’ becomes ‘just like us.’ (Stan, quoted in
Stewart, 2008, p. 97)

As Stewart (2008) points out, this “establishes a platform for situating the other, the ones
not like us, as abject and marginalized” (p. 97); some of these “others” are incorporated
within the “us”, while others are further “othered” because of their utter incompatibility
with this “us.” The boundaries between “us” and “them,” may be shifted, but are
ultimately not destroyed, and may even instead be reified through this practice.

Reminding readers that literary representations always come from certain ideological
origins, Stewart argues that students “must be able to look at the depictions of other
places and carefully examine the construction of those places in a larger social context,
one that helps them recognize when characters become reflections of their own
ideological images” (Stewart, 2008, p. 104). In other words, international and
“multicultural” children’s literature, when done uncritically, can be ineffective, and even
counterproductive, in challenging the hegemony of the white, able-bodied, middle-class
experience as normative; or, as Taylor explains, “the hegemonic discourse framing most
teachers’ reception and teaching of literature outside the Eurocentric canon – multicultural education – offers culturally reductive and relativist interpretive frameworks insufficient and possibly detrimental to the ethical demands of such texts” (Taylor, 2007, p. 298).

For example, the use of children’s literature to promote cross-cultural empathy is a practice described by Taylor (2007) as “slippery and highly romanticized” (p. 300). Although empathy may be used effectively as a way of beginning to build relationships and of encouraging readers to see past difference, this alone is not going to be enough to fully address systems of oppression. Kumashiro (2000) rightly points out that “the root of oppression does not reside solely in how individuals think about, feel towards, and treat one another, and thus, empathy cannot be the panacea. It is necessary, but not sufficient” (p. 35). Furthermore, he argues that we cannot even take it as a given that empathy will be produced, and that even if it does – and students come to empathise with the other as someone just like “us” – the distinction between “us” and “them” is not necessarily broken down (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 35). Taylor (2007) also cautions that the object of empathy can end up being consumed by a “multicultural appetite” that might prove to be less about genuine empathy and more about the need to see oneself as empathetic (p. 301). While empathy can be a powerful tool if used ethically, the potential risks involved with it demonstrate the possible problems that can be encountered with anti-racist literature.

Given this context, Ching’s (2005) article “Multicultural Children’s Literature as an Instrument of Power,” does an excellent job of mapping out some of the main debates and problems within the field of anti-racist children’s literature. Although Ching uses the
word “multicultural” – a term often understood among Canadian critical race scholars as “quite clearly a depoliticizing move, and a preferred approach among those who do not want to engage in power relations and ‘antiracist’ education” (Ku, 2008, p. 51) – he uses it in a critical, anti-racist context, and differentiates between what are referred to as the “assimilationist pluralism” and “multiracial democracy” models within multicultural education (p. 130). The first designates a field of literature that promotes scenes of racial harmony, even in cases where the oppressed group is being forced to conform and assimilate into a society in which it continues to have little power; the second describes a perspective that actively acknowledges and resists power inequalities so that all groups may participate fully in shaping society together. Ching argues that although the texts from the pluralist perspective do have many positive features, “harmony is never a value-free concept that can be achieved in an ideal space beyond politics” (Ching, 2005, p. 135), and a more active political engagement is needed if we truly intend to use literature as a way of building a more equitable society. Without such an engagement, Ching (2005) warns that “multicultural” literature can even be harmful, and that “when children’s fiction substitutes racial harmony in place of reparation, the work may masquerade as advocacy when, in reality, it subverts minority causes” (p. 130; emphasis added).

Kumashiro (2000) also provides a useful framework for evaluating four different anti-racist pedagogical approaches, which can be easily applied to an analysis of the pedagogical impact of a literary work for children. He criticises approaches that focus only on changing or improving representations of the “Other,” arguing that a framework that does not also problematise the ways that normative identities are created and
privileged is incomplete (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 35). He also takes issue with approaches that look at the production of privileged identities without taking into account the different experiences among members of oppressed groups, and the limitations of expecting that “consciousness-raising” will necessarily lead to action (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 38). The approach that Kumashiro advocates, “Education that Changes Students and Society,” takes into account systems of oppression as well as the discourses that maintain them, and proposes an approach “laboring to stop repetition [of oppressive histories] and rework history/discourse” (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 42; emphasis in original). This teaching perspective is one that can also be advocated for literature, calling for children’s novels to actively work to disrupt oppressive structures and to supplement these with new systems and knowledges.

Considering that literature is about more than just what’s written in the novel, attention is needed to the ways that readers and teachers who use novels that address themes involving race can do so in a way that does aim towards anti-racist objectives. In her reflections as a white teacher working with *To Kill A Mockingbird* in a mainly white high school, Megarry (2004) discusses the mixed reactions to that novel, from the people who see it as an important way of addressing race issues to those who “object to the racist language in the text and feel that the book ‘undermin[es] race relations’” (Megarry, 2004, pp. 1-2). She argues that some teachers, uncertain about how to address race appropriately, instead “tend to downplay the role of racial power structures in the book in favor of discussing ‘universal’ themes of tolerance,” an approach that sacrifices some of the book’s main messages and points of contention in favour of avoiding conflict (Megarry, 2004, p. 3). Megarry (2004) writes that teachers should be proactive in
“highlight[ing] the examples of institutional racism in the book, rather than only seeing racism as a series of individual choices,” so that they can support their students in reaching a more complete analysis of race issues (p. 8), and particularly cautions against the dangers of claiming to be colour-blind, especially when facilitating discussions on the novel with a classroom that includes racialised students (Megarry, 2004, pp. 11-12). Her reflections are pertinent here because of the many parallels between Bifocal and To Kill A Mockingbird, and for the advice that she provides in reading and teaching novels that deal with race in ways that foster a more systemic critical perspective.

Megarry’s reflections also point to a general need to be aware of the context of reading, to read critically, and to acknowledge that readers can bring multiple critical perspectives that can affect the ways that a book is received and the impact that it has. Taylor (2007) writes that “readers’ direct responses to novels are not pre-critical, ‘stock’ or ‘wrong’ but rather, a form of situated knowledge essential to both an affectively and critically engaged dialectical process of ‘extension, reflection, deepening, and possibly strengthening’ of interpretation” (p. 303; emphasis in original), indicating that reading is an active process, involving dynamic relationships and interactions, and a process that is always contingent on the readers’ prior experiences and investments with the topics. Similarly, Zine, Taylor, and Davis (2007) argue that “attention to the politics of reception recognizes that even resistant texts cannot secure deconstructive readings, but are always already ‘worlded’ […] within particular material and discursive ‘relations of exchange’ […] as well as reading formations which produce particular reading dispositions and desires” (p. 276). In their prescriptions for responding to Orientalist texts, they note that “[a]nti-Orientalist resistance is not only deconstructive – critiquing Imperialist
stereotypes and assumptions about Western superiority – but also constructive in offering alternative contemporary and ‘traditional’ representations” and remind us that the audiences of works that represent Muslims and Islamophobia are many and diverse, with agency to produce multiple readings that do not necessarily conform to the Orientalist mould (Zine et al., 2007, p. 275).

As Booth (2008) argues,

Critical literacy asks us to examine how particular texts work, the choices the author made, the intent of the publisher, the point of view expressed, the omissions, and the biases. It also calls for agency: readers are to recognize how the text is affecting or controlling them; contribute to change and to social justice; confront inequities; and see alternative viewpoints to those presented by the author. (pp. 23-24)

Children’s literature that attempts to insert itself into “multicultural” or “anti-racist” categories can have numerous and often contradictory effects, and the readers who engage with it are an integral part of the process. In the examination of the novel *Bifocal* that follows, I look at the text itself and at the responses that it has produced in two different classrooms, but I also ask what other outcomes and readings might be possible, where are the areas of risk and the areas of potential transformation, depending on the critical perspectives from which readers approach the text.

**Crash politics and Bifocal**

In its analysis of the movie *Crash*, the recent book *Crash Politics and Antiracism: Interrogations of Liberal Race Discourse*, edited by Dei and Howard (2008), echoes many of the questions, concerns, and critiques that I wish to raise in my analysis of *Bifocal*. As a film, written and produced by a white Canadian, that portrays a series of encounters involving racism and received extensive praise as an apparently anti-racist
project (Howard, 2008, p. 25), Crash has very similar goals, and has received similar reactions, to Bifocal, albeit on a much larger scale. Many of the academic analyses found in this collection can be applied to Bifocal as well, which makes it worth a moment of consideration for this research.

The anti-racist framework within which the editors of the book locate themselves is important for my own analysis of Bifocal, particularly in the emphasis that “[r]ace matters and racism are not situational but systemic and institutionalized” and that to “[situate] the problem in individual intentions and acts with no critical interrogation of the systemic nature of race/racism and its embeddedness in asymmetrical power relations” would be a naïve and incomplete understanding of how racism functions (Dei & Howard, 2008, p. 4). Instead of this, Dei (2008) argues, “[r]acism must be seen as structural and systemic. Attributing racism to individualized accounts of racist incidents or melodramas limits the potential and possibilities of anti-racist work for social transformation” (p. 17). The incompleteness of a narrative that understands racism as only individual or interpersonal therefore results in an incomplete response to the problem of racism. In order to even attempt to resist or respond to racism, these “structural and systemic” dimensions need to be taken into account.

Adjei (2008) writes that, despite the good intentions of the teachers who may be working with the “dominant and liberal understandings of racism” as an individual or interpersonal problem, the omission of considerations of systemic racism “continue to reproduce negative effects on racialized students” (p. 128). As he argues, the omission of a systemic anti-racist analysis in Crash is not neutral, but is instead potentially deeply harmful to its racialised audience. Moreover, as Ku (2008) argues,
A multiculturalist explanation of race, racism, and its effects is presented in the film. By explicitly naming racism as its focus and through other strategies, the multiculturalist discourse of this film names and disguises itself as ‘antiracist’ in the sense of confronting racism (or at least blatant discrimination), but also ultimately denies its devastating effects. This is quite different from the critical antiracist stance that explores historical constructions of race and the perpetuation of racist discourses and structures that fundamentally produce racialized subjects. (Ku, 2008, p. 52)

In other words, the mere fact that the film discusses racism (manifested most often, as Ku points out, in incidents of “blatant discrimination”) does not necessarily produce an antiracist work; similarly, Bifocal cannot simply be lauded for the fact that it focuses on racism, but rather needs to be held to account for the ways that it engages with race and related issues. Some of the problems that the book’s editors identify with Crash – “[t]he omission of structural factors, the denial of the salience of race, the failure to recognize the severity of issues for certain bodies, and simplistic, commonsense ways of understanding what it means to be racially progressive” (Dei & Howard, 2008, p. 4) are also highly present in Bifocal. Moreover, even in the ways in which it could potentially prompt critical reactions, it can also easily fall prey to the kind of liberal, individualistic, and multiculturalist tropes seen with Crash.

If there are so many problems with Crash – problems that, as we will see, are reflected in many ways in Bifocal – then what is the purpose of engaging so critically with its effects? As Zine (2008) explains,

Crash can yield important pedagogical opportunities for pushing students to delve into the film’s subtext and discover deeper sociological meanings. By questioning the film’s dominant message, raising contestations, and proposing alternative understandings, the film can be used as a powerful tool for media literacy. By challenging the face value of the film’s representation of contemporary racial politics, students can learn to become critical consumers of culture rather than passive spectators. This allows for a greater sense of agency in the role of the spectator to negotiate new meanings and question the commonsense of hegemonic assumptions. (p. 199)
It is important, in other words, to consider what can be learned from the film (and, for my purposes, from *Bifocal*), and how we might watch or read it in order to challenge it, rather than simply passively absorbing its message. Other writers in the collection also frame their research with questions that can prove useful to this study of *Bifocal* as well. Dei and Howard (2008) ask how we can “simultaneously recognize and affirm the inherent salience of media and culture education while at the same time problematizing popular discourses and cinematic productions devoid of a complex and critical reading of society” (pp. 3-4). Adjei (2008) asks “[h]ow do we deal with good intentions, especially when they are producing negative effects? How do we critique *Crash* in a way that will not discourage further projects about the importance of racism?” (p. 127). In addition to this, we might ask, how can we take the problems that we may see in works like *Crash* and *Bifocal* and engage with them in ways that are not only critical but also useful and productive? And how can we harness the good intentions that are expressed by many of those who would wish to use these works for anti-racist purposes, and direct these intentions so that they can go beyond the limitations of these works towards producing a more comprehensive and responsible critique?
CHAPTER TWO: INTRODUCING BIFOCAL

Loosely based on the arrests of the Toronto 18, a group of young men arrested on terrorism charges in June 2006, the young adult novel Bifocal is a fictional account of a high school in suburban Canada where a student is arrested as part of a raid on a suspected terrorist group. The book’s narration alternates between Jay, a white Christian Canadian of European background, and Haroon, a Muslim Canadian whose grandparents came to Canada from Afghanistan. The characters are written, respectively, by Eric Walters and Deborah Ellis, both well-known Canadian children’s authors; according to one journalist, Walters is “known for writing action-packed tales that appeal to boys” (Gordon, 2007, para. 8) while Ellis’s reputation is “for her deft handling of stories that touch on such hot-button issues as AIDS in Africa and the status of women in Muslim countries” (Gordon, 2007, para. 5).

The story begins at Jay’s football practice, which is interrupted by a school lockdown; Jay and two friends hide on the school’s roof, a vantage point that allows them to see one student being arrested, and another, initially also handcuffed by police, being released. In the following chapter, narrated from Haroon’s perspective, we find out that it was he who had been taken and then released, and that his friend Azeem, a fellow student on the academic “Reach for the Top” team, has been arrested as part of a mass operation against a suspected terrorist group.

As the narrative progresses, the tensions in the school and broader community rise. Muslims are talked about in the media as terrorists; the police are continuously questioning Haroon and implying that he must bear some guilt or hold some information; and the area of the school where Muslim students often congregate is vandalised. Jay
witnesses increasing expressions of racism from the football team captain, Kevin, although he remains silent. Haroon’s twin sister, Zana, begins wearing clothing that covers her head and face, which she explains as an act of standing in solidarity with her fellow Muslims against the racism and exclusion they face from mainstream Canadian society, a decision that confuses and angers her family.

The climax of the story occurs on Halloween night, when Jay joins other members of his football team in a night of vandalism of the homes of teachers and opposing football coaches, culminating in an especially intense attack on Haroon and Zana’s house, in retaliation for Zana having insulted Kevin earlier that day. Jay participates – at times reluctantly, and at times even enthusiastically – in the attacks, but comes to regret it the following morning. When he runs into Haroon, Jay eventually confesses to having been part of the vandalism; Haroon decides that it is not worth telling anyone, but asks Jay to help clean up. The story finishes with Jay deciding to defy the entrenched divisions of his school environment, and to choose to sit with Haroon in the cafeteria, as an act of resistance against the social segregation of the student body.

After it was first published, Bifocal found high praise in Canadian media, where it was widely covered, and in several prominent journals that review young adult literature. Writing for the Hamilton Spectator, Gary Curtis (2007) calls Bifocal “perhaps the bravest, most important, engaging and enraging, most satisfying work of fiction for young Canadians in a long while” (para. 1), going on to say that the novel “will make you think, render you angry and saddened, and leave you hopeful and reflective” (para. 3).
Another review describes *Bifocal* as “thought-provoking and timely” (Doucet, 2007, para. 1), and says:

This is a powerful and important book, one that will speak to modern teen readers in a way that they will undoubtedly hear and respond to. The book is written simply and directly, without the subtlety or sophistication that might put off more reluctant readers, but the questions that it raises are ones that are topical and urgently need to be addressed in our world today. Without falling into didacticism, Ellis and Walters thoughtfully depict a full range of reactions and widely-held beliefs. (Doucet, 2007, para. 5)

In particular, the reviews hail the novel’s “examination of the dangers of racism and the redeeming value of tolerance” (Mills, 2007, para. 4), as well as its depictions of “other cultures, the schisms within cultures and how easy it is for intolerance to fester” (Curtis, 2007, para. 18).

*Bifocal*’s value as a pedagogical text is specifically emphasised, both inside and outside of formal educational settings. The book is recommended “in the English, social studies, religion or civics classroom” (Mackey, 2008, p. 30), and for use in both junior high and senior high school classrooms (Rosser, 2007). Some reviewers are even more emphatic, arguing that “it should be in every Canadian classroom, Grades 5 through 12” (Curtis, 2007, para. 19), and that “*Bifocal* should, and will, enjoy a wide readership and would make an excellent choice for class, or group, discussion” (Doucet, 2007, para. 6). Criticisms of *Bifocal* are few and far between – one review describes certain characters as “formulaic” (Mills, 2007, para. 3) – most, on the contrary, cannot seem to say enough positive things about the novel.

These overwhelmingly positive reviews and persistent recommendations that *Bifocal* should receive a wide audience point to the importance of critically analysing the impact of the novel. Moreover, the emphasis on this novel as a vehicle for conversations
on and explorations of themes of racism (and the suggestion, in all of these reviews, that *Bifocal* is, in fact, contributing something useful to such conversations and explorations) should be cause for us to look closely at what the book is actually doing towards these goals of discussing and addressing racism in today's social and political contexts.

Some of the most prominent themes raised in *Bifocal* will be analysed in more detail in the following chapter, with attention to the ways that they challenge and reinforce stereotypes and systems of power, as well as the potential ways that these themes can be read so that they promote social justice and critiques of systemic oppression. Although I am investigating a work of children's literature in a classroom context, I locate this research less within frameworks of pedagogy within formal educational institutions, and more within broader frameworks of understanding the effects of popular and literary cultural products that claim to be promoting an anti-racist point of view. While the classroom environments in which the book was discussed are, of course, not irrelevant, I use the ensuing discussions as a way of understanding the potential reactions that a novel such as this one can provoke, rather than as a reflection on classroom pedagogy or on anti-racist teaching practices within schools specifically.

**Methodology**

The writing that follows reflects a combination of my own analysis of *Bifocal* and of the themes that it covers, and of interviews conducted with two teachers who have used *Bifocal* in their English classrooms. I had initially planned to interview three teachers; however, when the time came to conduct the interviews, I was unable to contact one of the teachers who had initially agreed to participate, which left me with only two
interviews. Of the two that I did speak with, one was someone I knew already as a friend, and I found the other through an online search. I also circulated an email call for participants among some contacts in education. Each interview was approximately one hour long, and the interviews were qualitative and semi-structured; I had drafted a list of questions ahead of time, focusing on both the teachers' and the students' responses to the book, and many of their responses gave me direction for new questions and discussions. Although I had begun with a list of specific themes in Bifocal that I wanted to discuss with each participant, each of them raised all of these themes (with the exception of the book's ending) as powerful moments in their classes, even before I asked specific questions about them. To the two teachers’ reflections I add my own reactions and analysis of the text itself, and suggest additional possibilities for how it may be received and understood.

While the interviews discussed here demonstrate some of the ways that Bifocal can be taught and received, this thesis represents only a small portion of the possible research that could have been done regarding this novel. Both of the teachers I spoke to had studied the book with their students in September, many months earlier, and their reflections were mediated and potentially limited by the time that had elapsed since they had used Bifocal in their classrooms; my research could have also been enhanced by being physically present as the book was being discussed in the classes, or by conducting the interviews closer to the time that the book was studied, rather than hearing only the later reflections. I have spoken only to two teachers; there are other teachers out there who are also using this book, and whose pedagogy and teaching objectives would likely expand the possibilities analysed in this thesis immeasurably. Time and logistical
constraints also limited me from being able to speak with members of the youth demographic to whom this book is targeted, which is another major limitation of the conclusions of this research, particularly with regards to the politics of how *Bifocal* is received; even the student responses that I do refer to in my research are mediated through their teachers’ recollections of them. Although I believe there is significant value in my focus in this work on the impact of *Bifocal* on students in predominantly white environments, and the potential that the novel has to raise questions about power and privilege within such spaces, further research should also take into account the reception of *Bifocal* within a more diverse audience, and the kinds of conversations that it may provoke among students of Muslim backgrounds, and among young people of colour.

**Introduction to the research participants**

In order to explore some of the possibilities for how this novel may be used in practice, I interviewed two teachers who have taught *Bifocal* in their English classrooms. These interviews provide insight into the reasons teachers might have for choosing *Bifocal*, the possible discussions that the novel might provoke, and the potential advantages and problems for using a novel like *Bifocal* as part of an anti-racist teaching practice. Both teachers are white women of similar backgrounds: Scottish, Irish, English, Christian, middle-class, and both grew up in small- to mid-sized, predominantly white, Canadian cities. Both of their classes were also almost entirely white, and neither had any Muslims in their classes. It is worth noting, therefore, that my focus here is on the use of *Bifocal* as a way of talking about racism among white people; teaching this novel
in a classroom that was primarily composed of Muslims and/or of people of colour would likely bring about very different reactions and discussions.

The first interview I conducted was with Jennifer, a grade six teacher who teaches in a public school an hour outside of Toronto. Her class this year had twenty-five students, with slightly more girls than boys, and only two students of colour. Jennifer had read the entire book out loud with her students at the beginning of the school year. Once they had finished reading it, she had the students work in pairs to identify quotations from the novel that they found particularly powerful. The students produced visual images that reflected the quotes, and which were then posted on bulletin boards on the wall, with one side representing Jay’s experiences, one side representing Haroon, and a middle section for images common to both characters.

My second interview was a phone interview with Hannah, a Canadian teacher at an international boarding school in Europe. Her English class began with eight students, a number that increased to ten as the semester went on. Each student in her class was from a different country, mostly from across Europe, but also including one Canadian student and one from Bhutan (the only person of colour in the class.) Although officially a grade nine course, the division of classes at Hannah’s school is more fluid because of the varying levels of English language ability, and the class included a range of ages, from thirteen to seventeen. Hannah began reading the book aloud with her class, but because of time constraints, decided later to read only key parts of it out loud, with the rest as independent reading. Each week, students had a reflection assignment related to the themes they encountered in *Bifocal*. At the end of their reading of the novel, Hannah had the students write longer papers exploring specific themes in detail.
Both teachers were familiar with the books of both Ellis and Walters before they came across *Bifocal*. Jennifer was attracted to *Bifocal* because, having only begun teaching grade six after a decade of teaching older students, she wanted a novel that was not too “juvenile” in its story. Each of them felt that the book that would be accessible to the wide range of levels in their respective classrooms; Jennifer wanted something that “would be able to hit my lower learners in their understanding but also have the ability to have my higher learners really start critical thinking,” while Hannah was looking for “a mother tongue book that ESL students can handle, [but] also doesn’t talk down to them, which […] kind of hard to find actually, like a book that deals with real issues, that deals with them in a way that can interest a 17-year-old, you know, challenge them and make them think, and that still is linguistically readable for people whose English is not that great.”

Jennifer described her main motivation for teaching *Bifocal* as part of her own pedagogical philosophy of using the class material to foster students’ engagement with social issues. As she told me, “the only way I can get impassioned about teaching is to make my students impassioned about what they’re learning… there has to be a purpose behind it, and I really want to make them think about the world that they’re living in.” She used *Bifocal* as a “take-off for the theme of the year, which was looking at equality, and social justice, and basically making them become aware that they can be the change they want to see in the world” (referring to a quote by Gandhi on a poster that she had in her classroom.) Later topics studied within this theme of “equality and social justice” included the Holocaust, child labour, and fair trade, and each of these topics was connected back to some of the themes discussed in *Bifocal*. 
On a personal level, Jennifer told me that she “loved the book,” explaining that:

I loved the way it showed both sides. It showed what both young people were going through, and it showed how similar their reactions are, you know, just, they may pray differently than me, but they have the same feelings, they have the same thoughts, they have the same fears… and the whole injustice thing is very important to me.

It was clear from the interview that her responses to issues of injustice play an important role in how Jennifer sees herself as a teacher. She also explained that other teachers and staff at the school rarely challenge her on the social issues that she brings into the classroom “because they know that’s me… I’m not going to be passionate about teaching unless I can make my students impassioned about thinking critically for themselves.”

Like Jennifer, Hannah described her reasons for using *Bifocal* as part of a strategy for creating space for discussion and reflection on social justice-related topics:

part of the reason why I came here to be a teacher in the first place was to, kind of, expose students to questioning things that they might think, or to issues that maybe they’ve never encountered, and specifically in the kind of social justice, environmental direction, because at this age… they haven’t been exposed to that much probably, and if you just kind of nudge them, or show them a book, or ask them a question, it can make a huge difference to the rest of their lives, really, thinking about it in sort of grand terms.

While Jennifer focused broadly on global issues of social inequalities, Hannah’s class looked specifically at the theme of “relationships across borders.” After *Bifocal*, the class read Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, and then students read books of their choice, with topics including the Holocaust, South African apartheid, and homophobia. She gave context to the class by having them think about the kinds of borders that relationships may cross:

I started off the class by making this huge list of “things that can unite or divide people,” including ethnicity, race, class, religion, sexuality, gender […] figuring
out, like, where do I stand on this list? And if I look at this list, does this list – is this a representative picture of me as a person, who I am? The answer from everybody is no, of course not, these are just weird labels, that yet have such huge power to unite or divide people. And then we just kind of got into the class from there, basically.

A major focus of Hannah’s teaching was her belief that relationships should be formed across borders – a message that has particular import in an international school – and much of her emphasis seemed to be on the importance of individuals transcending those borders, and not on a systemic critique of how the borders came to exist. The significance of this perspective with relation to Bifocal as a work (and, specifically, as a work that engages so directly with race and racism) will be examined in Chapter 4.

As they used Bifocal in their classroom, the two teachers’ perspectives came to shape, reflect, and conflict with the reactions of their students to the novel. Jennifer’s main goal seemed to be to encourage her students to think critically about the world at large, while Hannah’s emphasised seeing past borders to build friendships and connections. These are both important and valuable goals, and although I am critiquing the book (and the responses that it raised) from an anti-racist framework, this is not to say that an anti-racist framework is the only perspective from which the book can or should be read and taught. The absence of a focus on anti-racism as the primary perspective for teaching the book is not necessarily a sign of weakness or failure (and, indeed, both classes did address racism to a large extent.) At the same time, given that the book does revolve so centrally around issues related to racism, it does warrant a concentrated critical engagement with its treatment of this theme, and it needs to be held to account for the ways that it addresses the issue. It would be impossible to talk extensively about racism in a neutral way. Bifocal needs to be examined for what it does and does not do to deal
with racism, and for the kinds of conversations that it provokes and that it elides. The interviews with Jennifer and Hannah are used, therefore, not to evaluate their successes as teachers, but rather to uncover some of the possibilities and the limitations that *Bifocal* may provide, through considering, among other things, some of the issues that arose, and some of the questions that went unasked or unanswered.
CHAPTER THREE: LOOKING CLOSELY AT SCENES IN BIFOCAL

In order to understand some of the issues presented in *Bifocal* in a more concrete way, I will be looking in some detail at four of the book’s major themes and events, and the reactions that arose to these in each of the two classrooms. Each of the sections of this chapter is preceded by an excerpt from the book, intended to provide a sense of the way that the issues are presented within the novel itself.

Many theorists who work with children’s literature have attempted to develop criteria for evaluating the anti-racist or anti-oppressive messages of children’s books. Ching (2005) proposes a series of questions that can be asked in order to evaluate a book’s success in challenging, rather than reproducing, systems of oppression and inequality. He encourages us to ask:

- “Does the book’s subject matter, topic, or theme demand attention beyond racial harmony and require emphasis on equity or reparation?”
- “Does the work demonstrate awareness of or challenge existing structures of power and domination?”
- “Does the historical context demand a narrative of cultural survival?”
- “For books that may exceed a child’s social development, does the book’s communal function justify its selection?” (Ching, 2005, p. 134).

These questions – for my purposes, the first three in particular – serve as useful and thought-provoking criteria for considering the role of children’s literature for social justice purposes. Similarly, feminist literary theorist Lissa Paul (1998) also proposes a set of useful questions that can help us understand how children’s literature can contribute (or not) to these goals. Paul’s questions include:
“whose story is this?

• who is the reader?

• when and where was the reading produced?

• who is named? and who is not?

• who is on top?

• who gets punished? and who gets praised?

• who speaks? and who is silenced?

• who acts? and who is acted upon?

• who owns property? who is a dependant?

• who looks? and who is observed?

• who fights for honour? and who suffers?

• how are value systems determined?” (Paul, 1998, p. 16).

Although much of Paul’s focus is on analysing earlier works of literature, her questions are applicable to Bifocal as well, particularly in the ways that they can help to evaluate issues of power that arise within the text. Both sets of questions will be referenced throughout this chapter as I explore some of Bifocal’s main themes.

**Institutional racism and racial profiling**

[Narrated by Haroon]

“You don’t mind if we chat for a moment, do you?” With his arm around my shoulder, Detective Moffett walks me to the police car at the curb. Another officer is standing by the car and opens the back door. “Slide on in there for a moment.”

“We can talk out here,” I say, knowing how many eyes are on us – on me. The police are not supposed to question a minor without a parent present, I remember from law class. I’m about to assert my rights, but then I start to wonder if I’m remembering it correctly. Instead, all I manage is a feeble “I really have nothing to say.”

“Get in the car, Haroon, unless you want us to think you’ve got something to hide.”
It doesn’t feel like I have a choice. I get in. They close the door. I’ve never been in the back of a police car before. I look at the door and realize there’s no way to get out from the inside. I start to shake. I hope I hide it well. […]

“We’re talking about serious threats on the lives of a lot of people,” Detective Moffett says. “Did you ever stop to think about what blowing up a school would do – not just to our city, but to our whole country? Did you?”

I shake my head.

“People would become too afraid to let their children go to school. The education system would collapse. The economic fallout would be staggering. An attack on a school is an attack on our entire way of life. Now, just imagine if the subway system or our government buildings were no longer safe either. Imagine what that would do to the economy.” […]

“Don’t be afraid, Haroon,” Detective Moffett says […] “We know you weren’t involved. You come from a good, respectable family. Father a professor. Mother a doctor. Your family has tried hard to fit in. Not like some of those others.”

My brain is racing as fast as my pulse. How do they know about my family? And do they think they compliment me by insulting others?

But I’m too scared to defend myself or anybody else. […]

“I’m sure your family is proud of you,” says Detective Moffett. “You’re not going to get mixed up with bombings. And you know that withholding information from the police about these things is just as bad as doing them yourself. Worse, even, because you know it’s wrong. You’re not all full of these crazy notions that are damaging the good name of your religion around the world. What is that saying? ‘All it takes for evil to triumph is for men of goodwill to do nothing.’” […]

Detective Moffett gives me his card. “Call me about anything day or night. Let’s clear up this mess.”

I take the card. I don’t have the guts to refuse it. “I don’t know anything,” I say. There’s no way to say that without sounding guilty.

(Ellis & Walters, 2007, pp. 54-58)

One of the major issues that surfaces throughout Bifocal is that of racial profiling and intimidation tactics on the part of the police. Images of racial profiling arise in many arenas; for example, in media reports that paint all Muslims as threats to Canada (Ellis & Walters, 2007, p. 155), or in the no-fly list, on which members of Haroon’s family are erroneously placed (Ellis & Walters, 2007, p. 170). It is also clearly one of the reasons that the police repeatedly harass Haroon throughout the story. After being mistaken for a fellow student who is later arrested and charged with terrorism, Haroon is repeatedly confronted by police officers who attempt to intimidate him and to suggest, based only on
his background and religion, that he is also part of the alleged terror plot. Police officers even violate Haroon’s legal rights by questioning him without a parent present (Ellis & Walters, 2007, p. 55), and by threatening to assume he is guilty if he does not talk to them (Ellis & Walters, 2007, p. 263).

This topic was one of the first to arise in each of the interviews that I conducted, with both Jennifer and Hannah mentioning it as a topic that provoked especially strong reactions for their students. Hannah told me that it “really got them,” and Jennifer said that “they felt frustration with the injustice that […] Haroon was being questioned just because of the colour of his skin.” From Jennifer’s perspective, the salient message was that of the fear that the police provoked in Haroon:

   a big discussion came about […] how scared they would be when the police came in, in their black clothing, and threw him to the ground, and one of the images that came of that [in the collaborative art project that the class later produced] was him sitting in the back of the police car, and the girl drew a face, with hands covering the face, and all you could see were the eyes poking out between the fingers, and a teardrop, and the one – and a quote, I can’t remember the exact quote, but it was… I’m so scared, or something. And then another girl drew a picture of a boy, kind of in the very back corner of a room, all by himself, and – with these big, terrified eyes, and the quote that she said was just three words, I am terrified – I was terrified. So they really focused in on his fear.

The strong reactions that the scene elicited in each classroom reflect the potential that this issue has to reach students and to prompt discussion and reflection. It could even be possible for this engagement with issues of racial profiling throughout the novel to raise questions about systemic and institutional racism and inequalities within Canadian society, despite its celebrations of tolerance and multiculturalism; after all, these celebrations of multiculturalism are not sufficient to protect some Canadians from the surveillance and intimidation of a state that deems them a threat. In this example, we can respond affirmatively to Ching’s (2005) second question, which asks if the work
“demonstrate[s] awareness of or challenge[s] existing structures of power and domination” (p. 134), as the existing power structures are exposed and depicted as highly problematic and unjust. In fact, the violence of the police’s intrusion and arrest is compared to the brutality and unrest that Haroon’s classmates experienced in Kosovo, Haiti, and El Salvador (Ellis & Walters, 2007, p. 25), a link that challenges popular images of Canada as a place of guaranteed safety and security and acknowledges the presence of structural and institutional oppression. On the other hand, the focus on fear as the primary response means that the specificity of Haroon’s situation is elided; although they can imagine that the scene would be scary, the majority of Jennifer’s students, who are almost exclusively white, and entirely non-Muslim, would likely never actually have to face this kind of fear. The privilege of not being the one vulnerable to being arrested (mistakenly or not) in this way should be more deeply examined.

The critiques of racism within Canadian society appeared to have at least some success in both of the classes, with Jennifer emphasising how “shocked” her students were, and Hannah relating her students’ “indignation,” and their angry questions such as “they’re police officers, they shouldn’t act like that, what the hell are they doing? How is that legal? How does this happen in real life?” Although the teachers both said that not all of their students were shocked, the sense of indignation seemed widespread, and both classes seemed to make connections to this kind of event happening in real life. Hannah’s class reacted particularly strongly to the police officers’ racism (and not only to their aggressive intimidation tactics):

there’s this one part where the police officer says, um, something really racist, like, “he’s brown, so I just took them both,” that’s in the first chapter, when he just arrests Haroon as well as the other kid, and my students were like, did he actually say that? Did that really happen? That’s shocking! I was like, that
probably didn’t happen [in real life], but at the same time, the reality is that there is a lot of racism in policemen and -women as well as other people.

Despite some successes of these critiques, there are also some troubling elements to the way that this issue is presented, elements that undermine the power that it may have to trigger the levels of critical thinking necessary for a more thorough engagement with ideas of race and racism in Canada; these elements can be seen both within the book itself and within some of the reactions to it. Bizarrely, Haroon’s friend Julian seems to have no qualms about confronting and even joking with police officers (Ellis & Walters, 2007, p. 59), which, considering that Julian is a young black man in a Toronto suburb, seems, at best, unlikely, and an unrealistic representation of race relations between black youth and the police force. More importantly, Haroon himself eventually seems to free himself from the psychological hold that the police have on him, simply by deciding not to let it affect him anymore:

[Narrated by Haroon]
“We’re looking hard here for some kind of cooperation from you, and I’ve got to tell you, Haroon, you’re not making it easy for us.”
“I am, actually,” I say. “By not accusing people on a hunch, I’m saving you from going after people who may have had nothing to do with it.”
Detective Moffett doesn’t buy that. “Unless you give us something – someone, we’re going to have to assume that you’re part of it.”
“Either that, or you’re protecting someone,” the cop on the other side of me says, “which makes you every bit as guilty as if you were actually doing something yourself.”
“Arrest me, then,” I say. “Charge me with something, or quit bothering me. I have nothing to tell you, and I’m done with talking to you. Charge me and give me due process or let me out of the car.”
There’s a long silence. Then, to my surprise, the door is opened, and I’m allowed to leave.
I step out of the car, and I don’t look back. (Ellis & Walters, 2007, pp. 263-264)

There are, certainly, many significant positive aspects to this moment. Haroon is shown to be standing up for himself, and asserting his rights, an action that might be used
to encourage readers to be aware of their own legal rights. My concern, however, comes in the implication that this small moment of triumph has solved the greater problem, when in reality this type of racial profiling and police intimidation will surely continue (and who’s to say that Haroon himself has actually escaped it?) Haroon’s request for due process is one that is not always honoured, especially for non-citizens, as recent history of arrests and detentions based on security certificates has demonstrated. Ultimately, this exchange – which occurs in the second-last chapter of the novel – might suggest that, although police racism and abuse of power exist, they can be overcome if their targets simply decide not to be affected. The falsity of this assumption should be obvious; in addition, it places the onus on the oppressed group to not let the dominant group’s racism bother them, and not on the more powerful groups (in this case, the police) to reform themselves or to stop what they are doing. This perspective ignores the very real abuses of power that occur within police forces and that oppress and marginalise many racialised groups. The physical consequences of these often make it impossible for such actions to be simply ignored, even if those affected are, like Haroon, able to overcome the psychological consequences to some degree.

Furthermore, despite my own hopes for this theme as a way of entering into critical conversations about Canadian institutions, it did not seem that these conversations arose; at least, it does not appear that these conversations were at all integral to discussions of this theme, and it was easy to overlook them entirely. In Jennifer’s class, as mentioned above, it was the idea of Haroon’s fear that most powerfully reached the students, and even this became somewhat de-politicised through the way that this fear was equated with fear that Jay was also experiencing:
But then they also related it [Haroon’s fear at being arrested and questioned by the police] to Jay’s fear. When it was confusion and he didn’t know what to do, and also the way that Haroon felt, kind of pressured to stick up for his family and the boy that was arrested, and his culture, and Jay felt similar pressure, but it wasn’t to do with family or culture, it was peer pressure, I want to be cool among my friends.

The presumption of any equivalence between the fear experienced by each of the two protagonists seems simplistic, to say the least, considering the stakes are much higher for Haroon, facing police officers who have a great deal of symbolic and physical power, than they are for Jay, whose main objective is maintaining his popularity as a member of the football team. This assumed similarity between the two experiences allows this difference in stakes to go unacknowledged, and diminishes the necessity of a critical conversation about exactly why Haroon finds himself in such a vulnerable position.

Jennifer also explained that, given that her students were only in grade six, she did not feel that they were at the level of critical thinking needed to fully comprehend the issue of police oppression as raised in *Bifocal*. Hannah, teaching in a European school, did not have much of a commitment to using this book to teach about race issues specific to Canada, and also largely avoided the discussion of institutional racism. It appears, therefore, that although this topic could lend itself to a more systemic analysis of racism, it does not necessitate such an approach. Overall, although the theme of racial profiling and police intimidation in *Bifocal* seems to have some potential for raising discussions about structural racism in Canadian society, it needs to be read through a critical perspective that refuses neat and simple conclusions, in order for this potential to be realised.
Responding to overt racist comments

The scene below is quoted in order to give some context to the discussions that ensued around it; however, I acknowledge that my reproduction of it here is another instance of a problem that I criticise later in this discussion, where reproduction of racist images and words rarely happens in a neutral setting, and can always be harmful regardless of the intention of the person communicating the racist ideas. I copy the scene below with some hesitation, and with an acknowledgement of the violence that it has the potential to cause even when I write from a perspective that is so critical of it.

[Narrated by Jay]

[Kevin] slowed down and then brought the car to a stop behind another vehicle. It was sitting right in front of Wal-Mart, by the entrance, two feet away from the curb, blocking the lane so you had to swing into the oncoming line of traffic to get by. [...] We could see through the back window of the car that there were two women – one driving, the other in the passenger seat. They were both wearing big swirling scarves.

“Stupid idiot… can’t drive because she can’t see past that thing twisted around her head. Must be on so tight it’s blocking the flow of blood to her brain.” [...] “Hey!” Kevin screamed, and the driver turned. She was wearing a thick scarf that not only covered her head but most of her face as well.

“What are you waiting for?” he demanded. “Can’t you read the sign? It says no parking! You should be riding a camel instead of driving that piece of crap. Get it moving – unless you’re planning a suicide bombing!”

Through the narrow slit in her headgear, I saw her eyes widen in shock, and then fear. She rapidly started to roll up her window.

Kevin rocketed the car forward, and with a squeal of rubber we left them behind. He started laughing wildly, I found myself laughing too, even as I slouched down in my seat. [...] “Lots of people park there and block the way.” Steve said.

I noticed them too when I’d been here at the mall with my parents.

“Just because lots of people do it doesn’t make it right. Besides, people shouldn’t be able to drive wearing those stupid things on their heads. How can they see?”

That was the same argument I’d heard my father use more than once. [...]
“Maybe Wal-Mart has a special section for them to get their head wear… probably beside the bedding section. Don’t some of those things look like bedding?”
I smiled. Some of them did.
“And another section, right beside the linens, would be where those guys can get towels for their heads.”
“Those aren’t Arabs. Those are Sikhs, aren’t they?” I asked.
“Sikhs, Arabs, same difference.”
I shook my head. “Arabs are Muslims and Sikhs aren’t. They’re from India… which makes them sort of Hindi, I think.”
“Since when are you an expert on religions?” Kevin demanded. He didn’t sound happy.
I should have kept my mouth closed to begin with. “I’m no expert.” This was getting uncomfortable. “What are you picking up?”
“I hope it’s food,” Steve said. “I’m hungry.”
(Ellis & Walters, 2007, pp. 90-93)

This scene had a powerful impact on the students in both Jennifer’s and Hannah’s classes. Jennifer spoke about it as a scene that “haunted” her students, and said that they were “shocked, and offended, highly offended, and angry with [Kevin], and angry with Jay that he didn’t say anything.” They also “really had an emotional connection to those words. They really felt horrible that they were being said.” Hannah also described the anger and frustration of her students who were “up in arms” about Kevin’s comments and about Jay’s silence. This frustration was mentioned repeatedly throughout both of the interviews; the students were clearly deeply affected and offended by the comments raised in this scene. In both classes, much of the anger was directed towards Jay, whom the students criticised forcefully for his passivity, which was seen as complicity in the racist comments made by Kevin, even if Jay was not making the comments himself.

The teachers themselves also found it a difficult and challenging scene. Jennifer spoke about it as the biggest challenge that she faced when reading the novel aloud to her students, and the anxiety she felt while reading it to them:
after I finished reading it, [...] they said, you read that really fast, and I said, yeah, I did. They said I was uncomfortable reading those words. And I said yeah, I was uncomfortable saying those words. I said, why do you think I read it fast? And they said, because you were uncomfortable, and we’re not used to hearing those words, and they’re not nice, and – and then I was honest with them. I said, you need to understand, like – okay, why would Walters put that in? Why would he put that in the book? Because, does he really believe these things? And then we got into the discussion of his purpose for putting it in, and I was honest with them about what I was thinking, that, you know, I was afraid that some of them would go home and tell their parents that I was saying all these racist comments, and so we had, you know, a good discussion about the purpose, and – and the emotional reaction to it…

As members of predominantly white classrooms, it seems that the students could identify, to some degree, with the pressure that Jay felt to stay quiet. Hannah’s class recognised in Jay experiences of their own silence and complicity in similar situations; despite their identification with it, they maintained that Jay’s response was unacceptable. In contrast, Jennifer told me that her students’ first reaction was to say that “we’ve grown up in a school system that encourages us to stand up to bullies and to stand up for doing what’s right, and that’s just part of what we’ve been taught, so it’s ingrained in us.” This initial rejection of any complicity was, however, followed by later discussions about peer pressure, and some level of understanding about why Jay might have acted in the way he did.

On one hand, the attempts to understand Jay’s actions (or lack of action) in this scene can be taken as an indication that students were prompted to explore the ways that they themselves have been guilty of similar things, and that Bifocal can be read in ways that provoke reflections about personal responsibility in racist actions. On the other hand, especially considering the ways that Jay redeems himself at the end of the novel, it might be possible to not take this scene too seriously, because readers can eventually come to feel that Jay has learned his lesson.
An additional disturbing moment comes later in the same scene, where Kevin, Steve and Jay trade racist jokes against Asians and Chinese people. Their jokes invoke common stereotypes about Asians as bad drivers who eat dogs and rabbits (Ellis & Walters, 2007, pp. 94-96). This scene provides an unsettling response to Paul’s (1998) question about who speaks and who is silent (p. 16), considering that no Chinese person ever speaks in the book; the only ones who make any appearance at all are those spoken for in this scene, and only in very pejorative ways. In fact, Jay even joins in with his own joke about “Driving While Asian” (Ellis & Walters, 2007, p. 96), and expresses no discomfort at all with the stereotypes that get circulated. Unlike the earlier comments regarding Muslims, which the novel challenges to some degree by its presentation of a variety of Muslim characters, or the comments about black people at the end of the scene, which Steve (a character of mixed black and white racial background) problematises (albeit in an inconsistent and convoluted way), the anti-Asian racist comments spoken by all three characters in this scene are not challenged by any alternate representations, or by any characters’ intervention. There is not even an expression of some level of passive discomfort such as what Jay experienced in response to Kevin’s verbal attack on the Muslim drivers. Although the scene is clearly not meant to condone the boys’ comments about Asians, the lack of any redeeming representations anywhere else in the book is still cause for concern. It seems that the Asian references are made in order to highlight Kevin’s racism; Chinese bodies become the backdrop in order to make a point about a white man’s racism, but are not seen as important enough to warrant any agency of their own.  

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2 It is worth noting that a similar thread runs throughout the book with relation to portrayals of women, particularly those observed by Jay. Jay interacts with very few females in the story, and those he does
Interestingly, Zine (2008) writes about a similar situation for stereotypes about Asians in the movie Crash, who “do not fare well” and “are depicted as heartless, opportunistic human traffickers not to mention stereotypical ‘bad drivers.’ Yet neither representation is redeemed. These images remain static and the only defining referent for these characters” (Zine, 2008, p. 195). Is it just a coincidence that it is specifically the anti-Asian racism that seems to go unpunished (and even unacknowledged as such) in both Bifocal and Crash? This scene suggests that Asian-related stereotypes, even if problematic, are benign and not worth attention; compared to the more vocal and violent expressions of anti-Muslim racism, anti-Asian racism is represented as petty and frivolous, a move that denies the harmful effects that racism does have on Asian bodies.

Moreover, this scene raises larger questions about what it means to be a white writer reproducing overtly racist language when the book’s audience is virtually certain to include students from the groups being discussed, or a white teacher reading such language out loud in a classroom that includes racialised students, especially when the classroom is so overwhelmingly white. It is difficult to imagine that the power of these words could be entirely erased by the intentions of the writer or teacher, no matter how well-placed the intentions may be. Repeating such degrading stereotypes may be justifiable in some situations, especially if the stereotypes are being addressed head-on and directly exposed as wrong and harmful. Repeating them without addressing their effects at all is far more questionable. I am not arguing for carefulness in language and

mention are depicted as whiny and materialistic (for example, Ellis & Walters, 2007, p. 74), as lovesick followers of the football players (Ellis & Walters, p. 33; also p. 195), and as potential liabilities, who might inform on the football team members about the Halloween night vandalism (Ellis & Walters, 2007, p. 237). As with the Asians discussed in this scene, women are used and degraded throughout Jay’s section of the book, presumably in order to make a specific point about the white male protagonist, without having much agency of their own. It is disturbing, however, that this happens with a great deal of subtlety; these women are never redeemed, and nor are we ever asked to hold Jay to account for his sexism.
representation for the sake of political correctness, or politeness, or to avoid controversy; I do, however, call for a caution and sensitivity with regards to these words, because such language always has the power to wound, regardless of the intention behind it. Eric Walters, who wrote the scene, has explained his use of racist language in the book because “[y]ou hear derogatory terms in schools all the time” (quoted in Gordon, 2007, para. 18), and through asking “[h]ow can you teach about racism if you can’t use racist words?” (quoted in Curtis, 2007, para. 23). His reactions direct attention away from the privilege of not having been on the receiving end of such terms; the simple fact that derogatory terms are ubiquitous does not mean they no longer cause harm, and throwing in “racist words” with little context or direct condemnation of them could conceivably turn into an act of violence itself. While there may be cases in which reproducing these stereotypes could be justified, I am not convinced that this is one of them. Jennifer’s discomfort in teaching this scene, as discussed earlier, may be one indication that she herself felt that there was something not quite right about saying those words in front of her students, regardless of her relationship with them or of their understanding of her own positions on race issues.

Despite this, it seemed from the interviews that both teachers had managed to create relatively safe spaces within their classrooms to discuss the more personal and emotional experiences of racism. Jennifer even talked about a young black girl in her class responding to this scene with stories of her own about comments that she had faced, a contribution that resulted in expressions of compassion and support from her fellow students. In the right context, this scene may provide an opportunity for open discussions and even validation of the experiences of students of colour, allowing them to speak
openly about the racism that they have encountered, rather than only addressing race issues within multiculturalist frameworks. At the same time, such discussions would only be possible in settings where students of colour could feel very comfortable speaking their minds, and there are many settings in which this scene could be incredibly uncomfortable and unsafe for students of colour, particularly in classrooms that are predominantly white. Moreover, it would be important to avoid putting students of colour in a position where these discussions of their experiences would be demanded of them, a possibility that the scene certainly leaves open. It remains the case that the scene has significant potential to harm, particularly for Asian students or readers. Megarry (2004) writes, for example, about being a white teacher using *To Kill A Mockingbird* in her classroom, and being asked by the mother of one of her students to avoid saying the N-word out loud when reading the novel to her class (p. 14). The mother spoke about her older child having felt “very uncomfortable” as one of few black students in the class when they had read the book several years before, and she wanted to avoid putting her younger child through the same experience (Megarry, 2004, p. 14). Although different students (and parents) may experience the literature differently, and may not all have the same needs when it is studied, this example does point to the power of racist words to harm, regardless of the anti-racist objectives of the teacher or author.

Ching (2005) asks, in relation to multicultural children’s literature, if “the work demonstrate[s] awareness of or challenge[s] existing structures of power and domination” (p. 134). This scene certainly does show some awareness of existing power structures, but it does little to directly challenge them. Moreover, another of Ching’s questions – “Does the book’s subject matter, topic, or theme demand attention beyond racial
harmony and require emphasis on equity or reparation?” (Ching, 2005, p. 134), can probably be answered in the negative with regards to this scene; the racist comments themselves appear to be the problem (which is a problem that can be solved with racial harmony), and Jay seems more concerned about ending the uncomfortable discussion than he is with any longer-term responses. Although this scene could be used as a tool for engaging in conversations about what it means to be silent in the face of oppression and violence, this should be done with an awareness that vocal attacks are not the only form in which racism can exist, and with particular attention to the harm that may be caused by the language used in the scene.

Exercising narratives of veiling and resistance

[Narrated by Haroon]
“I don’t think it would hurt any of us to look more like Muslims,” [Zana] says.
“Look like Muslims?” My mother pulls her over to the mirror in the hallway and stands there with her. “And how should a Muslim look? There are close to a billion and a half Muslims in the world. Should we all look the same? Should we wear yellow stars, so we can be easily identified?
“I’m just saying—”
“You’re not saying anything! I’ve taken you to International Women’s Day. We’ve marched in Take Back the Night. We are feminists!” My mother is really angry. My father and I can only stand out of the way.
“We can wear the abaya and still be feminists,” my sister begins.
“Women in my family threw off the veil in the 1920s in Afghanistan. Why did they do that? Why did they pay the price of beatings and trouble, just so their great-great-granddaughter could cover herself up like the chattel of some overbearing man?”
“You don’t understand.”
“No. You don’t understand. This is not Islam! The Koran tells us to be modest, not to disappear!”
“Your interpretation of the Holy Koran is not the only one.”
(Ellis & Walters, 2007, pp. 125-126)

[Narrated by Haroon]
Her eyes, all I can see of her face, look at me over the black veil.
“Why?” I ask [...] “Just tell me. You’ve found God, you’re doing it to annoy Mom, you’re doing it on a dare or a bet – whatever. Just tell me why. I’m ready to hear you now.”

Although I can’t see the rest of her face, I can read her eyes. I never realized before how much you can read in just a person’s eyes. Always before, I’ve had the whole face to look at and interpret. But all I have now of my sister is her eyes. And I can tell she’s trying to decide whether to bother telling me.

Then she speaks. “Ever since September eleventh – before that, but especially then – people have hated us because we’re Muslims – don’t interrupt me!”

I have no intention of interrupting. I am too happy to have her actually talking to me.

She continues. “They hate our names, they hate our traditions, and they think we’re all mindless terrorists who want to strap dynamite to our chests and go blow up a Toys ‘R’ Us. They don’t see us as people.”

She pauses. I take a chance on speaking, hoping she doesn’t think I’m interrupting. “But if we continue to look and behave so differently from most people,” I say, “they’ll never trust us.”

Zana sits down [...] I give her a moment to work out what she’s trying to say. “Not all of us can do that,” she tells me. “How we dress is so much a part of who we are. Some women believe – believe – it is their duty to God to be fully covered. Some have only been in this country a short while, and they have worn the veil in their home countries all their lives. When they must get used to so many new things already, do we really need to add clothes to that?”

“But people think I make you wear this,” I say. “They think Dad and I are oppressing you. It’s fine if you believe in it, or if you’re used to it, but that’s not you. Why do you have to wear it?”

She stands up and goes back to work, dismissing me. “It’s called solidarity, Haroon. Look it up sometime.”

(Ellis & Walters, 2009, pp. 168-169)

A third element of the novel that I want to discuss here is the decision of Haroon’s twin sister, Zana, to begin dressing in abaya (a long garment that covers the body) and niqab (clothing covering her head and face, leaving her eyes visible.) While Haroon spends most of the story trying to stay as far as possible away from controversy, Zana, in contrast, deliberately chooses to become more involved, explaining her decision to begin wearing this clothing as an act of resistance against a social structure that she views as hostile towards Muslims (Ellis & Walters, 2007, p. 168). In many ways, Zana’s active decision to dress in this way (despite, even, the wishes of her family) challenges
stereotypes that paint Muslim women as oppressed or passive, and Muslim women’s clothing as restrictive and imposed by patriarchal structures; Zana’s strong feminist personality – she explicitly states that “we can wear the abaya and still be feminists” (Ellis & Walters, 2007, p. 125) – further complicates this picture. By portraying the donning of this clothing as an overtly political act, the story may even serve as way to disrupt monolithic conceptions of feminism that conceive of female agency in narrow ways that often do not apply to all women.

Although not without its problems (discussed in more detail below), this element of the plot has many facets that correspond strongly to the anti-oppressive critical lenses proposed by Ching (2005) and Paul (1998). By clearly stating that her culture is under threat, and that this threat requires a response that actively resists the racism that her community faces, Zana’s character “demand[s] a narrative of cultural survival” (Ching, 2005, p. 134), in which she deliberately works to claim a space that is safe for Muslims in Canada. She also “demand[s] attention beyond racial harmony and require[s] emphasis on equity or reparation,” (Ching, 2005, p. 124) and refuses to accept a quiet “racial harmony” that would ultimately entrench inequalities. As a Muslim woman, she is named as an individual (to respond to one of Paul’s questions), and is given significant voice to articulate her own political aims. At the same time, she is not a main character, and this voice is somewhat limited.

However, returning to Paul’s question on who is named, one notable group of people whose members are not named consists of Zana’s friends who also wear similar clothing, a group repeatedly referred to by Jay, Haroon and others as faceless and indistinguishable from one another, even “eerie to watch” (Ellis & Walters, 2007, p. 187).
Although Zana is understood, to some degree, to hold a certain level of agency in her decision to wear *niqab*, her friends are not portrayed as having anywhere near the same level of individuality or authority, instead described repeatedly as all looking the same (for example, Ellis & Walters, 2007, p. 119). Similarly, if we consider Paul’s question of who speaks and who is silenced, we see that none of Zana’s friends (or any Muslim women aside from Zana and her mother) ever speak. Against this silent backdrop, Zana is seen as perhaps an anomaly, with the further suggestion that *most* Muslim women who dress in certain ways are fanatical and/or oppressed, and that Zana’s agency is a rare exception to a much more passive norm. The potential for Zana’s character to challenge stereotypes or to present alternative possibilities of how Muslim women may act and make decisions is compromised by the suggestion that the majority of Muslim women (and, specifically, those who wear the clothing that Zana does) do not have much individual agency or autonomy. Even Zana, who seems so passionately committed to her *niqab* throughout the novel, is quick to recover from her anger when Haroon rips it off towards the end of the book (Ellis & Walters, 2007, p. 242), which calls into question the strength of this commitment.

This tension between seeing Zana as a strong and independent character while remaining sceptical about the potential for other Muslim women to reach the same level was reflected in the interviews with both teachers. Zana and her actions were the subjects of great controversy and debate in each of the classrooms, with students struggling to reconcile their admiration for her confidence and assertiveness with their stock mental images of the clothing she wears as oppressive and imposed. A quote from Jennifer’s
interview reflects the back-and-forth that occurred as her class attempted to understand Zana’s character:

the students felt that, number one it was her right if she wanted to wear it, but they were also very torn with what her mom says, which was, “women for centuries in our family have been fighting to get this off, and here you are going against all of that,” so I think it brought up a lot of issues of what was right and what was wrong […] I think they knew that it was her right if she wanted to wear it, […] the final thought was that it was her right if she wanted to wear it, but she shouldn’t be made to wear it.

Although their support for Zana in the end suggests that the students had ultimately decided to side with her against those who might object to her decision, the emphasis that Zana “shouldn’t be made to wear it” still demonstrates a level of doubt that this truly is her choice, or that other Muslim women who wear similar clothing have much agency in doing so. After all, there is no evidence at all in the novel of anyone making Zana wear it; on the contrary, her family tries to dissuade her from that decision (Ellis & Walters, 2007, p. 125), and her brother expresses that it would be impossible to force Zana to wear anything (Ellis & Walters, 2007, p. 158). Why, then, would the students be so concerned about voicing their opposition to the hypothetical imposition of niqab or abaya? (Alternately, why would their teacher be so concerned about articulating this to me?) Perhaps this is simply reflective of the power of the anti-veiling sentiment, which can hardly be expected to be overcome as a result of one book alone; however, it may also reflect an insufficient addressing of the theme within the novel itself, a portrayal that positions Zana, to some degree, as an anomaly within a practice that is still normally oppressive. Still, Jennifer’s students, especially the girls, were powerfully drawn to Zana’s character, and Jennifer told me that they “could relate to the mother and daughter relationship.” The tension created between this feeling of discomfort and uncertainty
about Zana’s clothing choices and their support for (and identification with) her in other areas might be one way to open opportunities for building solidarity across difference, rather than expecting Zana to conform with the students’ perspectives on what she should be wearing in order for them to be able to relate to her.

At an international school in Europe, with students a few years older than Jennifer’s, Hannah’s class saw a wider range of opinions regarding Zana and her clothing. Although Hannah also noticed a strong level of support for Zana as a character, especially among the girls in her class, who admired the way Zana stood up for herself, the students were divided on their reactions to her decision to wear niqab. One of the students, a girl of European background who had lived in France when laws were passed that banned headscarves in public schools, felt that girls should be allowed to cover their heads if they wanted to; a male student from the Czech Republic, despite examining Zana’s character in depth in his final paper for the class, still concluded in the end that he disagreed with headscarves and thought that girls should be made to remove them. Overall, it seems that the students were uncomfortable with “the whole abaya thing,” as Hannah described it:

most of my students [said], they shouldn’t have to do that, and then I was like, well, you know, I do have friends who wear headscarves and it’s very important to them. They were like, hmm… but little kids shouldn’t be forced to wear them. You know, and it’s – you know, the kind of typical debate that always happens around that issue.

As with Jennifer’s class, it seems that Hannah’s students were unwilling to let go of the idea that this clothing is most often imposed, and that even if it might be possible to see it as more or other than a tool or oppression, the default assumption was that it was something forced on women and girls. Interestingly, Hannah mentioned her lack of
familiarity with “why Muslim women wear head-coverings” as one of the areas that she would improve were she to teach *Bifocal* again. She told me that “I also wasn’t able to fully give them a very good response, of why. You know, we just looked at the book, basically, we looked at what she had to say herself, what’s in the book.” We do need to ask here why this “why” matters; why did Hannah see it as necessary to go beyond “what she had to say herself,” to find other resources to support Zana’s claims? Does this suggest that Zana is not being trusted to make her own decisions, or that her motivations are insufficient? Would similar questions be asked of someone who was differently located in terms of gender, race, or religion, and who articulated their own reasons for adopting a particular cultural or religious practice?

Despite this apparent lack of background on the possible religious motivations for Zana’s decision, Hannah was able to convey some alternate meanings and experiences to the students.

There were a lot of things where the whole class [wondered] why would you want to do that, like you wouldn’t be able to move, that would be horrible. And then, I’d say, but she chose it, you know, she chose it in the book, some people do choose it, they choose it knowing full well what it means, and they choose it because, you know, for her it was important to show an outward sign of her religion and her solidarity, and to, you know, be visibly part of this, whatever the cost was to her. And, you know, she knew that she would get picked on and talked about at school. […] that was another scene that [angered the students], when Jay started pushing her around, [on] Halloween. Yeah, and so that – that also kind of made them think a bit.

Hannah’s emphasis on the “cost” of Zana’s actions being experienced not as gendered oppression but as marginalisation based on race and religion, and her reminder that the only clothing-related physical violence that Zana faces in the novel comes from Kevin, adds important nuances and challenges to the ways that Zana’s experiences may be understood.
As a final thought on how Zana’s character might be read, if we move back from the discussion of Zana’s particular actions, it may also be worth asking what it says that her character even exists and acts in the ways that she does. As Martino and Rezai-Rashti (2008) explain in their discussion of the “veil as a signifier” (p. 425), the very presence of the veil often reflects certain predetermined ideas about the lives of Muslim women and the factors that define them. Did the authors feel it was necessary to have Zana decide to wear *niqab* in order to signify certain things to us as readers? Could she have been a politically engaged Muslim woman without having to take an obvious stance for or against this clothing? What would the effect have been if she had? Although the analysis of Zana’s actions and statements is relevant on its own level, the question of what is signified by the very presence of her character is also important to consider.

*Bifocal’s ending: a story of forgiveness and redemption*

[Narrated by Haroon]

“Jay,” I ask suddenly. “Do you know who did that to my house?”

For a long while, he doesn’t say anything. Then he says, in a voice that’s hardly more than a whisper, “I know. I was there.”

“Why my house?” I ask him.

“I didn’t know it was yours and Zana’s. If I had known, I wouldn’t have…”

“Would you have stopped your friends?”

“It’s hard,” he says. “We’re a team. We have to act like a team.”

“I’ve never played football,” I say, and leave it at that.

“So, are you going to tell?” he asks me.

“No.” I wasn’t either.

“Do you think I should?” he asks, then answers the question himself. “I should.”

“No, you shouldn’t,” I say. “What would it help? It would just make more people hate each other more. More anger, more hatred, more problems.”

“So, what do we do then?”

I actually smile. “Those broken eggs are really hard to scrub off. We didn’t get them all cleaned up before we had to come to school.”

I can see Jay thinking, and then he smiles too. “Will Zana be there?”

I roll my eyes. We’re laughing as we walk together back to the school.

(Ellis & Walters, 2007, pp. 266-267)
[Narrated by Jay]

“Come on, Jay.” [Kevin] leaned closer. “I know you’re upset about everything that happened. But we’re a team.” “We are a team.” He smiled. “And this is lunch. I’m going to sit over there,” I said, pointing across the cafeteria. “With a friend.” Haroon was standing against the far wall. I raised my hand and he nodded. Kevin’s jaw dropped open. “You’re sitting with him?” […] Then he smiled and nodded. “I get it…I get it.” He leaned in closer again. “Brilliant,” he whispered in my ear. “You sit with him and nobody will suspect us of doing anything.” “Haroon doesn’t suspect,” I said. “He knows.” Kevin jerked back. Now his expression was fear. “But…but…how?” “I told him.” “You did what?” “I told him.” I started to walk away and he grabbed me and spun me so violently that some of my fries flew off the tray and onto the floor. […] “It won’t be just me getting in trouble,” he said. “Nobody is going to get in trouble. He’s not going to tell.” “What?” “He’s not going to tell the school, or the police, or his family. Nobody.” Kevin looked relieved for a second. “Why not?” “You wouldn’t understand.” “You don’t understand,” he said. “You’re through.” “I’m through with you. I’m still part of the team.” I turned and walked away. […] “What happened?” Haroon asked. “Nothing worth wasting time on. Where do you want to sit?” “Somewhere in the middle.” I followed him as he threaded his way through the tables and chairs. I knew it was just my imagination, but it still felt like everybody was staring at me – at the two of us. I hoped they were. (Ellis & Walters, 2007, pp. 270-273)

The ending of the novel – after Jay has participated in a night of vandalism that included an attack on Haroon’s house – sees Jay apologising to Haroon for his actions, Haroon accepting the apology and claiming that to turn in the football team would only increase feelings of antagonism, and Jay standing up to Kevin and choosing to sit with
Haroon in the cafeteria. Although this particular part of the novel did not stand out as a highlight to either Jennifer or Hannah, it is important to discuss it here because of the implications that it may have with relation to Bifocal’s ultimate message on the nature of racism and on the actions required to work against it.

While neither Jennifer nor Hannah mentioned the ending as a point of specific importance for their students, in contrast to the earlier three topics discussed in this section, which both teachers raised without any prompting from me, both spoke favourably about the ending when asked about it, and both recalled positive student reactions to it. Jennifer understood the ending as a moment where Jay finally refuses to be a “bystander” within systems of racism, and that his act of sitting with Haroon signals that Jay has decided that “I know what’s right.” Jennifer had not been around the school when the ending was read, and a substitute teacher had read it to the students, but she said that the students were quick to tell her about the ending once she returned:

they said, oh my gosh, you have to read the ending, it’s really good. So I think it was powerful to them. I think the fact that they went – that Jay went against the whole – finally stood up on his own two feet, because I think that was what […] they were most frustrated with.

Hannah’s class also liked the ending, although she said that “they weren’t very surprised.” She told me that:

we had talked about the cafeteria at lunch as it’s presented in the book as a sort of microcosm of ethnic and social divisions, and then how that same terrain is kind of overcome or transgressed, and they were definitely happy that [Jay] finally told [Kevin] off.

Hannah also talked about the ending when expressing her own admiration for the book’s theme that encourages people to “just simply refuse to be part of the cycle of fear,” that “it doesn’t have to be that way.” She described the ending of the story in a similar
context, explaining that “that’s the [message of the] ending of the book, that it absolutely does not have to be this way, and it’s going to start with something as simple as changing where you sit to eat your lunch, but that small gesture has so many wide-ranging ramifications everywhere.”

My own response to Bifocal’s ending is less positive; I worry that, while it paints an optimistic picture of the possibility for harmonious racial relations, it also presents an overly simplistic (and, arguably, unrealistic) conclusion that undermines some of the major points that the book made about issues of systemic racism, white privilege, and complicity in racist systems. I share the concerns raised by Ching in his discussion of the ending of Eve Bunting’s book So Far from the Sea (Ching, 2005, p. 130). In this book, which tells the story of a Japanese-American family reflecting on the imprisonment of Japanese Americans during the Second World War, the protagonists ultimately move to a position of reconciliation, rather than seeking to right the injustices that have taken place. In other words, “the discourse of reparation [is transformed] into a discourse of racial harmony” (Ching, 2005, p. 130). Ching (2005) argues that,

While forgiveness is noble, when it subordinates or erases reparation, the book’s Japanese American characters cannot fully mature. Instead, at key points, rather than articulate full critical awareness, they are erased by dominant ideology […] the Japanese American characters remain confined within the ideology of racial harmony and assimilative pluralism. Within this ideology, critical awareness remains infantile. Although the characters mature as they cope with loss, they cannot realise full economic, cultural, and political development, since they repress questions and hard truths that might otherwise move them to activism. (p. 130)

Similarly, while Haroon’s forgiveness of Jay (along with his decision not to report him) could be seen as generous and benevolent, it is a move that places its priority on avoiding conflict rather than achieving justice. In fact, given Haroon’s claim that “It would just
make more people hate each other more” if he informed on Jay (Ellis & Walters, 2007, p. 267), it is even possible to conclude that this relatively superficial harmony is the only legitimate solution, that justice is too messy and potentially divisive (ignoring, of course, the harm and division that the present injustice creates), and that Haroon’s act of forgiveness is not especially generous, but is instead the only acceptable response. The challenges that *Bifocal* may have posed to its readers earlier in the story to question their own complicity in interpersonal and systemic racial violence are erased – or at least undermined – by the conclusion, which ultimately suggests that our participation in violence and inequalities can be overlooked as long as we say that we are sorry, and that our apologies can allow us to escape any scrutiny related to structures of privilege and systems of violence. As Ching (2005) argues, an outcome based on racial harmony alone is “incomplete” because “harmony is never a value-free concept that can be achieved in an ideal space beyond politics” (p. 135).

Lissa Paul’s (1998) question about who is punished and who is praised (p. 16) is particularly relevant to this discussion of *Bifocal*’s ending. Jay, in expressing remorse for his participation, is exonerated and even celebrated for his ultimate commitment to sit with Haroon in the cafeteria; aside from offering to help Haroon clean up the vandalism (a task that still falls mainly to Haroon’s family), he receives no sanction either for his participation in the main act of vandalism or for any of his silence and tacit encouragement of racist conversations throughout the novel. Even Kevin, the ringleader of many of the most overt racist attacks, loses little more than Jay’s loyalty. On the other hand, Haroon’s generous and entirely voluntary agreement to keep Jay’s admission of guilt quiet (with a smile, no less!), while seen favourably, is also portrayed as the most
practical or natural thing to do; Haroon receives hardly any praise for this gesture of good faith. As Isin and Siemiatycki (2002) argue in another context, “Muslims as racialized immigrants are being compelled to act as virtuous citizens, reproducing the dominant ways of being a citizen rather than issuing a fundamental challenge to the racial and orientalist foundations of citizenship” (p. 207). Haroon’s likeability and legitimacy for white, non-Muslim audiences may have some roots in this performance of an overly virtuous response to racism, while the systems that created a situation in which such a response was even needed remain entirely intact. Dei and Howard’s (2008) description of Jane Ku’s argument that “*Crash* advances and authorizes only particular ways for those marginalized through race and/or gender to cope with and react to racism – that is, through passively and unemotionally grinning and bearing it and ultimately denying the violence and pain of their experiences of racism” (p. 9), applies here too, both on an analytical level as well as a more concrete one, with Haroon literally “grinning” and smiling as he responds to Jay’s confession.

Hannah, on the other hand, continued to see Haroon as a stronger character than Jay, and as someone who also played an active part in how the story concluded:

I see Haroon as a stronger character than Jay […] Haroon really understands this whole fear of terror, terror of fear thing […] he actually has the ability to step out of his – to kind of see beyond his own nose, to the broader picture, which nobody else can… Haroon, actually through the very intelligent and loving support he gets from his family and friends, actually gains the ability to see the kind of whole cycle of racism and fear for what it is, and to consciously choose to step out of it, and he does that, not through retribution, which then creates, kind of feeds the cycle more, but with friendship and with love and with forgiveness, and with, you know, accepting the offer of help, when it comes.

It is, perhaps, possible to discuss the ending, as Hannah does, through a more careful attention to Haroon’s agency than is presented in the final chapter of *Bifocal*; however,
the suggestion remains that the most admirable course of action for people of colour who face racism is to “step out of” it, rather than confronting it directly. Even if Haroon can be seen as a “stronger character” through his actions in the novel’s conclusion, the racism illustrated through Bifocal becomes de-historicised and individualised, requiring individual agreements from both victim and perpetrator to be overcome, instead of necessitating any systemic changes. Haroon’s agency here also elides the experiences of many who may not be in a position of being able to express such forgiveness towards their oppressor (including, for example, those whom the oppressor is still oppressing, and those whom the oppressor has never thought to ask for forgiveness.)

Hannah did feel that the book’s conclusion expresses “a very kind of fuzzy, fuzzy happy view of racism and how it can end,” and argued that “it’s definitely more about forgiveness than it is – it’s a kind of justice that’s more about forgiveness than it is about getting even, I guess.” Although she agreed with my concerns regarding the ending (which I expressed once the formal interview was over), Hannah remained committed to this idea of avoiding a sense of “getting even”:

we read some stories about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which also took kind of the approach that Haroon took, and this is one of the biggest examples in history of organised racism, and then an organised process of dealing with racism, and it – it took very much the same approach, of not – not dealing in retribution. And I don’t – who’s to say whether that’s right or wrong, and South Africa obviously still has lots of problems. But it was a – it is an interesting thing to look at, as – is that an effective way of dealing with racism? And another – what other examples do you have of where perpetrators are caught and punished, where it works? Where does punishment work?

This dichotomy, of either forgiveness or punishment, is interesting in that both options remain on the individual level. One could, conceivably, be opposed to the book’s emphasis on forgiveness alone without favouring a punishment-based approach, but
neither Hannah’s reflection nor the novel itself allow much space for this possibility. However, by suggesting that the alternative to Haroon’s response of forgiveness is to instead inform the principal about who committed the attacks – as Haroon says, “What would it help? It would just make more people hate each other more” (Ellis & Walters, 2007, p. 267) – *Bifocal* risks creating the impression that anyone who disagrees with Haroon’s approach is vindictive and will ultimately lead to “[m]ore anger, more hatred, more problems” (Ellis & Walters, 2007, p. 267).

On the other hand, as Spencer (2008) suggests, any discussion of forgiveness that leaves out an analysis of the context “not only at the individual level but at the systemic level as well” is likely to be incomplete (p. 133), suggesting that redemption cannot come without having to take full responsibility for completely understanding one’s role in situations of oppression. With regards to *Crash*, Spencer argues that it contains “an anti-religious dogma which preaches the possibilities of salvation for both the oppressed and oppressor without any repentance, apology, or reparation” (Spencer, 2008, p. 143). As Spencer’s comments suggest, her contention is not one of an inherent problem with the concept of forgiveness, but rather that, as it is presented here, that the forgiveness takes place in a context where not enough effort on the part of the oppressor is made to earn it.

What would *Bifocal* have looked like if the ending expanded the possibilities of an anti-racist response? For example, what if Haroon and Jay had decided, together, to begin seriously addressing systemic racism within the school? What if they had collaborated to open up conversations about the racism being experienced by other students? Alternatively, they could have decided to address systemic and institutional racism outside of the school context, by becoming involved with groups fighting against
racial profiling by police (after all, Haroon’s act of standing up for himself against the police officers is not likely to affect how those officers, or others, treat other people of Muslim or Afghan backgrounds), or confronting racism expressed in the media. It would be possible to imagine many other potential actions that could have led to a conclusion that promoted a much more engaged response to the racism that the novel described.

Although not completely implausible, the story’s conclusion may have dangerous implications in the ways that it lets Jay off the hook for much of his earlier support of (and participation in) the racism more vocally expressed by Kevin. At best, this ending can be taken as a well-intentioned (if flawed) attempt to conclude the novel on a note of optimism; at worst, it may leave its readers with a simplistic sense of what is needed in order to work towards social justice, and a suggestion that systemic inequities can be erased if only we decide to eat lunch with each other; preferably, “[s]omewhere in the middle” (Ellis & Walters, 2007, p. 273).
CHAPTER FOUR: REFLECTING ON BIFOCAL’S MESSAGES

Disrupting and reinforcing images of Muslims

Given that Bifocal focuses largely on racism against Muslims, an analysis of its impact must take into account what kinds of images about Muslims it is portraying, and how these relate to existing widespread stereotypes about Muslims and Islam. One simple way in which Bifocal might challenge some of the existing representations of Muslims in Canada is its depictions of the diversity that can exist within Muslim communities. Instead of relying on the two typical stock figures – the violent Muslim man and the oppressed, veiled Muslim woman – Bifocal presents Muslims as fairly diverse, encompassing a range of political opinions (from the government mole to the al-Qaida supporter), levels of religious practice, activities (professors, doctors, football players, and so on) and, yes, even clothing choices. This is certainly the bare minimum as far as disrupting stereotypes is concerned, and is not necessarily especially impressive, but it at least provides some nuance that can be contrasted with some of the more salient stereotypes that white, non-Muslim readers may be familiar with.

Many of the attempts to disrupt stereotypes are rather overt. A scene towards the end of the novel sees Haroon and his friend Julian playing catch with a ball that they found in the schoolyard. They bring Zana and some of her friends – “four veiled women” – into the game, and other students soon join them. Haroon notices the surprise of other students who, he imagines, are wondering, “[c]an Muslim women really laugh, run, fumble the ball, and toss it in a perfect arc, just like the rest of us?” (Ellis & Walters, 2007, p. 254). The scene is narrated from Haroon’s point of view, but seems clearly designed to showcase a “multicultural” group of students united in a typically North
American game of catch, a scene that seems rather clichéd, but nonetheless stood out to Hannah as an especially hopeful and powerful moment in the novel. Although the idea of value lying in the extent to which the “other” can be “just like the rest of us” is obviously deeply problematic, we might find some hope within the suggestion that these girls could be considered part of this “us” without having to change their clothing or religious practices, a proposition that may at least chip away at the image of Muslims as unassimilable within mainstream Canadian society. (Assimilation is obviously not the objective here, but the important point is that the divisions between “good” and “bad” Muslims, and the depiction of certain Muslims as irredeemably “other,” may at least be reconsidered.) Similarly, Haroon’s emphasis that he is not only Canadian but “third-generation Canadian” (Ellis & Walters, 2007, p. 23) is questionable in that we might wonder if he would draw less sympathy if his Canadian credentials did not go back so far (and if, therefore, other Muslim Canadians may have less claim to Canadianness than Haroon does), but on the other hand, it challenges perceptions that the Muslim presence in Canada is only a recent phenomenon, and that Muslims have no place within Canadian history. Again, these attempts to break down the divide between “us” and “them” are flawed and insufficient, but are still useful to some extent in disrupting existing stereotypes, and could potentially be used by readers as starting points to examine other representations more critically.

Although some of the images of Muslims in *Bifocal* can be used to resist racist images of Muslims, others may have the potential to reinforce conceptions of Muslims as violent and dangerous. For instance, one character who was not mentioned at all in either of the interviews, but who nonetheless warrants attention, is that of Hadi, a classmate of
Haroon’s. Hadi represents the more fanatical Muslim figure, someone who both encourages Haroon to “control” his sister (Ellis & Walters, 2007, p. 158), and who supports violence against the West in response to its violence towards Muslim communities (Ellis & Walters, 2007, p. 156). Things come to a head between Hadi and Haroon when Hadi is caught watching a DVD of Osama bin Laden in one of their classes; when Hadi tries to get the DVD back from the teacher who confiscated it, Haroon protects her, and Hadi’s anger turns on him, threatening that he will pay (Ellis & Walters, 2007, p. 202). Haroon later describes Hadi’s threats to him, combined with Haroon’s assumption that it was Hadi who made a bomb threat to the building where Haroon and his teacher were competing in an academic event, as the last straw in all of the confusion that he has faced, fuelling an angry outburst that leads him to win the competition (Ellis & Walters, 2007, p. 219).

Although Haroon has, presumably, many other sources for his anger – the increasing intimidation from the police, the arrest of his friend Azeem, the racism that he witnesses from the non-Muslim community – it is telling that the “last straw” for him comes from a fellow Muslim, and that it is a fellow Muslim that he first suspects of being responsible for the bomb threat and, later, for the vandalism on his house (until the racist slurs are discovered.) A few chapters later, it is Zana’s *niqab* that similarly represents the epitome of all of the chaos that Haroon has experienced, “a symbol of all the craziness that’s been swirling all around [him]” (Ellis & Walters, 2007, p. 242). While it is certainly true that Muslims can be antagonised by each other and not only by non-Muslims, the positioning of Hadi and Zana, in different instances, as both causes for Haroon going totally over the edge, suggests that the ultimate responsibility for the kind
of upheaval that the Muslim characters in this book experience lie primarily with other Muslims, and that even though racism and other forms of oppression may be a problem to some degree, it is Muslims who are their own biggest enemies and who bring these problems onto themselves. The passion or irrationality of their anger, moreover, can only be in response to the actions of others of their background; the disruptions to Haroon’s life caused by the police or by the vandalism at school are annoyances, but it is only Hadi or Zana that can provoke this kind of visceral response. This fuels stereotypes of Muslims and people of colour as irrational and emotional and allows the dominant culture to maintain its image as ordered and civilised; within this perception, such irrational and violent responses must necessarily come from communities seen as volatile already, and could not possibly come from the rational and disciplined mainstream society.

Haroon’s suspicion of Hadi also gives legitimacy to the mainstream media reaction of suspecting Muslims first in cases of violence, regardless of any proof. If even Muslims themselves jump to suspect other Muslims of being responsible for threats of violence, then surely the non-Muslim Canadians who do the same cannot be blamed for it. Furthermore, Hadi’s character gives increased weight to the perception that Haroon’s only option, in order to remain a likeable character, is to forgive Jay and continue to proclaim himself a proud Canadian despite the way he has been treated. Aside from Zana, Hadi is the only Muslim character that we see actively speaking out, for example, against Western attacks on Iraq and Afghanistan (Ellis & Walters, 2007, p. 156). (In fact, it could even be argued that Hadi is the only one to do so in an authentic or genuinely believable way, since Zana’s multiple explanations for wearing niqab and her lack of
strong reaction when Haroon rips the *niqab* off her face (Ellis & Walters, 2007, p. 242) may designate her as less firmly committed to these principles than Hadi is.) In a world where Muslims are characterised as “good” or “bad” depending on their allegiance to the West (Mamdani, 2005), the distinction between Haroon and Hadi suggests that the options for young Muslims are to either choose a generally apolitical response of forgiving and forgetting, or to respond with violence and rage; possibilities seem limited for critiquing oppressive elements of Western culture, either in Canada or abroad, without crossing over into the “bad Muslim” category.

Hadi did not appear to have made much of an impression on either Jennifer’s or Hannah’s students, unlike the largely positive reactions that the students had to Haroon and Zana, which does suggest that the potential negative stereotypes that Hadi may be reinforcing are not being reinforced all that strongly. However, the case remains that Hadi’s character *does* have the potential to further entrench the good Muslim/bad Muslim dichotomy, and to legitimise the kinds of fears that readers (especially non-Muslim white readers in largely non-Muslim, white environments) may already hold towards Muslims. His character is one that needs to be handled with particular caution, and further questions should be asked about the impact of his character, and the ideological history and implications that such a character carries.

**Disrupting and reinforcing understandings of Canada**

Although it is important to look at the ways that Muslim figures are represented in this text, it is equally important to look at the ways that members of the dominant society are depicted, and at the ways that the text could be used to unsettle, or to give added
strength to, the normative assumptions made about white, secular/Christian Canadian society. This is particularly necessary in contexts where most of the readers are members of the dominant group. It is especially important to examine this with relation to *Bifocal*, considering the presence of Jay’s character; this presence itself indicates that *Bifocal* is not only a story about the “other,” and that stories about racism are stories about perpetrators as well as victims.

*Bifocal* seems to have some potential to call into question normative representations of Canada as peaceful, tolerant, and welcoming to diverse cultures. The overt racism that Muslims face in the school, the racial segregation of the cafeteria, and the demonisation of Muslims in the media, all serve to illustrate ways that all is not as rosy as it seems in the environment depicted in the novel. Haroon even directly compares the police brutality experienced by his classmates and their families in Kosovo, El Salvador, and Haiti to the police officers’ violence in arresting him and Azeem, saying that, despite thinking themselves in a “land of peace and safety,” it comes to feel “like we never left home” (Ellis & Walters, 2007, p. 25). As discussed earlier in the section focusing on the police officers’ treatment of Haroon, there is space here for some critical reflection about how and why certain power structures operate in Canadian society. Some of the conversations about Jay’s silence could also lead to reflections on privilege, and on the need to actively work against racism, since silence becomes a ways of complying with it.

These lessons were taken up to some degree in each of the classrooms. Hannah used it as a way to talk about racism among police officers and others, and to reflect on the racism that her students witness in their own lives. Jennifer’s class connected *Bifocal*,
which they read at the beginning of the school year, to later class units on the Holocaust, child labour, and other social justice issues, indicating that today’s Canadian context is not entirely separate from these current and historical global injustices. Jennifer’s comment to me that *Bifocal* “opened so many doors to discussions throughout the year, of social injustice in the world” is significant in that “the world” here includes Canada, and that social injustice in Canada could be used as a starting point for discussing social injustice issues all over the world.

At the same time, it seemed relatively easy to gloss over the points that might have provoked a more extended critical analysis of privilege and dominance. In the discussions that ensued in Jennifer’s class on media literacy, students linked it to CNN, propaganda about the Iraq war, and “American culture in Canada”; the problem can be seen as predominantly an American one, and the negative effects of media representations can therefore be portrayed as not inherent to Canada. In Hannah’s opinion, there were “actually no distinguishing Canadian features within the story,” a factor that may have made it more accessible within her international school, but may also make it easy for Canadian readers to see it as not an especially Canadian narrative, and its social critique as therefore not especially essential to a Canadian context. Jennifer later talked about her goals for making her students aware of global issues, saying that “they need to be aware of things that are going on, with injustice, especially with how lucky they are to be going to school, in a free country, that sort of thing.” This comment, especially within a discussion about a story of racism and racial profiling, reflects a reluctance to question for whom this is a free country. While this book could conceivably be used as a tool for beginning conversations about power and privilege, it clearly does
not *demand* such conversations, and instead allows structures of privilege to go unexamined.

**Taking action against interpersonal racism**

It is interesting to note that, in both classes, reading *Bifocal* preceded (and even directly prompted, in at least one case) concrete actions within the school community to address issues of racism and oppression. In Hannah’s case, this was directly linked to the study of *Bifocal*; during the time that her class was reading the novel, the school was experiencing race-related tensions of its own, mainly aimed at the two black students in the school, with the single Turkish student also being the target of “pretty serious comments.” Hannah raised the issue with the class, and partly because these were issues that they were already discussing in their study of *Bifocal*, they decided to plan a presentation as a group that they would share at a school assembly. As Hannah describes the project,

we came up with [the idea of] demonstrating different forms of racism in a role-play form, from the obvious verbal insults to physical violence to jokes, you know, that maybe we think they’re funny, but they’re deeply hurting somebody, to simply ignoring people… And looking at how does racism manifest itself? And some of them are obvious, and some of them are less obvious, and maybe you didn’t think that jokes could be racist, or you didn’t think that they were anything but jokes, but, you know […] then we went into this thing where a couple of students explained what our class had brainstormed as the effects of racism on a community, that it pulls people apart, that it can make people feel bad about themselves, that it makes it harder to live together as a community… and then we did the role-play again, and kind of showing different ways that you can sort of react, like sort of modeling how to interrupt racist jokes, for example, or how to stand up for somebody else […] because that was another thing we sort of role-played at the start, was that, you know, if you see something that’s racist, and you don’t do anything about it, then that is also – this is also your problem, it’s not just that the other person is a horrible person.
Hannah told me that this experience “kind of brought *Bifocal* and the issues that it came with to life in our own community,” and that the students were able to link some of the issues that were discussed in their readings of the novel to their own lives; it also became an opportunity for them to more actively and concretely explore the many ways that racism can manifest itself, along with the ways that it can be addressed.

Jennifer also told me about a collective action that her students had taken to respond to a bully, soon after reading *Bifocal*:

> we had an issue of one student in our class this year, who did – was a bully, would deliberately do things to get a reaction, a negative reaction, from people. […] and he did say a couple racist remarks towards a couple of the black students in the school. So one day en masse, my students, on break – and I didn’t even know this was going on, they handled it themselves, I didn’t know until afterwards – on break, one of the recess breaks, en masse, all 23 of them, approached him […] they had one spokesperson, and said, we’re sick of it, and we’re not going to take it anymore.

Although Jennifer did not attribute this action directly to the class having read *Bifocal*, she observed that “a kid’s prior knowledge of what they’ve learned always plays into their reactions and their behaviour;” and that the students were acting from a motivation of “standing up for what was right,” which was a theme they were constantly exploring in class. Both of these examples suggest a potential for *Bifocal* to be used to promote responses to acts of interpersonal racism (although, as will be discussed in the next section, the novel remains weak in its handling of racism at a larger systemic level.)

**Understanding *Bifocal*’s perspective on racism**

Despite *Bifocal*’s potential successes in addressing issues of individual and interpersonal racism, from an anti-racism point of view, the overall message that *Bifocal* sends about racism and about what is needed to combat racism appears simplistic and
problematic, heavily influenced by liberal and multiculturalist views on racism that, while they may be more comfortable to teach, ultimately do little to fight racism on a meaningful level. As discussed previously with relation to its ending, *Bifocal* concludes on a note that implies that interpersonal friendships are what is most needed in order to solve racism. Author Eric Walters (quoted in Curtis, 2007) echoes this sentiment, in his description of the novel’s message that “We have to look at each other individually, people need to be together. This is how this dynamic works. That's how you get along” (para. 21-22). Although friendships and “get[ting] along” are not insignificant, the lack of attention to the need for systemic and structural change – change that extends far beyond what can be accomplished simply by making friends – presents an insufficient and unrealistic response, and a potential harmful one if its readers understand from it that they need not concern themselves about racist structures as long as they have friends of different backgrounds.

Racism in *Bifocal* is depicted primarily through individual comments and actions, racial slurs and vandalism. The only major exception to this is the police officers’ profiling of Haroon, which clearly has racial dimensions, and demonstrates a potential institutional level of racism as well, although most of the interactions with the police are still discussed on an individual level. By focusing so heavily on racism as interpersonal encounters, *Bifocal* ignores that “the impact of racism is felt by racialized bodies outside these specific encounters as the ubiquity racism, and its social and political effects cannot be limited to the confines of time or place” (Zine, 2008, p. 185), that racism is a more constant and daily reality than what is conveyed through descriptions of the more dramatic racial encounters. A personalised perspective on racism means that “racism is
effectively reduced to ‘individual acts of meanness’ detached from the systemic and ideological processes that rationalize its dominance and sustain racial hierarchies” (Zine, 2008, p. 197).

The focus on the individual level results in an erasure of the differences of power and privilege between Jay and Haroon. They are each individually praised for their actions in the end, and they become seen as each individually disadvantaged by the racism that they witness and experience. The first thing that Jennifer told me when asked what parts of the book most stood out to her students was “that Haroon and Jay both felt the exact same thing in […] the emotions and the fear and the confusion, and [in] a lot of the quotes that they [the students] picked [for their collaborative mural project], they saw similarities between how the two characters were feeling.” Later, Jennifer added that “they both felt pressure, they both felt scared, they both felt confused, and that was kind of the end – the culmination of it was that they saw that both of them were feeling the same emotions, despite the colour of their skin.” Jennifer’s claim that both boys “felt the exact same thing” erases power, and more importantly, erases the responsibility to think about how and why the two are different. After all, it is not exactly a coincidence that Haroon is the one being repeatedly questioned by the police. The racial privilege that Jay experiences – and any possibilities for considering his own responsibility and accountability – goes unacknowledged. In addition, by assuming similarity and thereby incorporating the “other” within “us,” borders between “us” and “them” are not necessarily eliminated but rather redefined; the boundaries between “us” and those who are really different from “us” are still entrenched, even when the category of “us” may be expanded. As Kumashiro (2000) points out,
the expectation that information about the Other leads to empathy is often based on the assumption that learning about ‘them’ helps a student see that ‘they’ are like ‘us’; in other words, learning about the Other helps the student see the self in the Other. Such a perspective leaves the self-Other binary intact, and allows the self (i.e., the normative identities) to remain privileged. (p. 35)

Boler (1999) also problematises this idea of empathy as identification, and in particular as a projection of the self rather than a deeper understanding of the one to whom the empathy is supposedly being extended (pp. 159-160). The risks of this, Boler argues, are that “the self is not required to identify with the oppressor, and not required to identify her complicity in structures of power mirrored by the text” (Boler, 1999, p. 160). While recognising difference – “enough to distinguish that I am not in fact the one suffering at the moment” – this process, Boler (1999) argues, “requires the other’s difference in order to consume it as sameness,” leading to a “consumptive objectification” in which empathy ultimately leads to a further objectification of the other, allowing the reader to take part in consuming the story that follows, without being called to consider the meaning of the difference between the reader and the object of empathy (p. 160). This “passive empathy” also risks leading to “a cathartic, innocent, and […] voyeuristic sense of closure” (Boler, 1999, p. 169).

And if racism is understood as expressed through individual acts, then, according to the novel, the response to racism also occurs at the individual level. One of the aspects of Bifocal that most stuck out to Hannah was the way that some of the characters, such as Zana and Julian, were seemingly able to decide not to be afraid or to let racism affect them. She praised the “people who just simply refuse to be part of the cycle of fear,” and expressed support for Haroon’s forgiveness of Jay as an act that demonstrates his ability to “see the […] whole cycle of racism and fear for what it is, and to consciously choose
to step out of it.” My intention here is certainly not to deny the agency of those who strive to remove themselves from systems of racism; however, the idea that people should (or can) simply refuse to be part of a racist society is disturbing for a number of reasons: first, it places the burden on people of colour to ignore the oppression that they are facing, which is surely an unrealistic option, to say the least; second, the idea that racism is something that can be refused raises the question about whether white people are being similarly called to step outside of it – a move that would ignore or deny the privilege that they experience as white people in a racist society, and would allow them to escape the complicity in racial oppression that comes with this position. Extended further, it might also suggest that those who would attempt to work against racism on a systemic level are wasting their time by focusing so much on racism itself, rather than simply deciding to step outside of it. What does it mean that *Bifocal* not only allows for the possibility of drawing this conclusion about racism, but that such a conclusion was in fact the most inspiring part of the book for Hannah?

Several writers have mentioned this issue in their critiques of *Crash* as well, expressing concern about a message that “dilutes its [race’s] meaning and serves race in a multicultural, ‘race relations’ paradigm that is reduced to ‘why can’t we just get along?’” (Dei & Howard, 2008, p. 8). Ku warns against a situation where “[i]gnoring racism is more rewarding than focusing on it” (Ku, 2008, p. 58), and her description of a young girl in the movie who innocently believes herself to be invulnerable has many parallels with this message from *Bifocal:*

The little girl, untainted by ‘seeing’ racism, helps the minoritized grasp that we can overcome racism if we do not treat it as something overdetermining our lives. Her *naïveté* should be ours too – racist bullets will not harm us if we become innocent to them. All our hopes and dreams for a safe and peaceful society
where we can conduct our businesses and work lie in the little girl, the ‘little angel’ as she is called. We could all be miraculously protected against discrimination too if we ignore it. (Ku, 2008, p. 61)

Of course, racist bullets (real or metaphorical) cannot be shrugged off so easily, and it seems hopelessly naïve for the novel to suggest that these bullets can be dodged by deciding to act as if they were not there. An additional problem with this perspective, which calls for everyone to let go of racism and its effects, is that it seems to place equal responsibility on all members of society – those privileged by racism and those marginalised by it – to end racism together. Again, little accountability is called for on the part of those who benefit from oppressive structures.

Another response to racism – or, perhaps, a particular means of stepping outside of it – that Bifocal seems to promote is the idea that racism can be overcome by friendly gestures and being “nice”; Jennifer’s message to her students was that injustice can be resisted “just by being a good person and standing up for what’s right,” and that they can “make a difference in the world […] by being who they are and having good character.” While there is certainly something to be said for continuously striving to be a good person and to treat people with compassion and respect, this response again seems simplistic, as it ignores the systemic and institutional levels of racism. Jennifer’s words can be read as encompassing a more engaged resistance at the systemic level, since she does also emphasise the importance of “standing up for what’s right,” but the repeated emphasis that racism (and, presumably, complicity in racist societies) can be avoided “just by being a good person” again leaves the impression that Bifocal is more interested in avoiding conflict than it is in creating permanent change. Ku (2008) observes, again with relation to the movie Crash, that
Remaining untouched is the question of how privilege and oppression work through individual actors by organizing us hierarchically, enabling and disenabling us depending on the positions we are in. Privilege is cancelled out by good intentions. Privilege as a freedom to act or not act against racism, to acknowledge or not acknowledge racialization, and to take on certain identities is unspoken. (Ku, 2008, p. 60)

In other words, relying on “good intentions” alone is itself a privileged position that goes unacknowledged if we assume that such intentions are all that is required for societies to change. As Dei (2008) argues, “[a]tributing racism to individualized accounts of racist incidents or melodramas limits the potential and possibilities of anti-racist work for social transformation” (p. 17); such understandings of racism can even have a negative effect on the extent that “anti-racist work” can be accomplished. Kumashiro (2000) similarly writes that “the root of oppression does not reside solely in how individuals think about, feel towards, and treat one another, and thus, empathy cannot be the panacea. It is necessary, but not sufficient” (p. 35). If we acknowledge that racism goes beyond individual and interpersonal interactions, then we have to work towards responses that also reach farther than the individual level.

One newspaper review of Bifocal even suggests that such individual responses are the only way to deal with racism: “there's only one way to break this chain of intolerance. And it's not for entire cultures to come together, to thrash things out, but for people, two or more at a time, to find common ground and to talk it out. And that's what happens [in Bifocal]” (Curtis, 2007, para. 15-16). The review implies that “thrash[ing] things out” is not a useful strategy; perhaps it seems too messy. Why bother confronting anything on a cultural level if we can just “talk it out”? Considering, however, the detrimental effects of ignoring racism at the systemic level, it becomes clear that this call to solve problems by talking it out is one that can only come from a position of privilege, where racism can
be seen as simply a “chain of intolerance,” a series of misunderstandings that just need to be cleared up.

The overall depiction of racism as an individual problem, requiring action and analysis only at the individual level, sends a dangerous message, particularly in a book that has received so much praise for its handling of race issues. In my conclusion, I look for the ways that *Bifocal* can be read that work towards a more systemic understanding of racism.
CONCLUSION

The intent of this research is not to determine whether or not *Bifocal* should be read by children or taught in classes. The book *is* being widely read, and it has made its way into a number of classrooms (I am aware of at least two teachers who have also used it, in addition to the ones I interviewed) since its publication two years ago. The teachers that I interviewed both spoke enthusiastically about their students’ (and their own) love for the book, and recommended it as a novel that immediately engaged its readers, who in turn recommended it to their families and friends. Both teachers also spoke about the deep impact that *Bifocal* had on their students; Jennifer mentioned aspects that “haunted” her students “in a way that stayed with them,” while Hannah talked repeatedly about her need to constantly remind her students that they were reading a work of fiction, in reaction to their passionate responses of indignation and anger with some of the scenes of the book. As I discussed in Chapter 4, reading *Bifocal* even had a tangible impact for both sets of students in the concrete steps that they took to respond to bullying and racism within their own communities. The studies of *Bifocal* also raised connections with looking at racism and violence in other arenas as well; both classes, for example, looked at the particular role of the media in contributing to racism and to support for wars. The high praise for the book among both teachers and students, and the popularity of its authors in the field of children’s literature, mean that, even with its significant problems, *Bifocal* has had, and will likely continue to have, an impact on Canadian students, and a critical engagement with what such an impact may entail is imperative.
Given that, critiques aside, *Bifocal* likely *will* be read by large numbers of young people, and used by teachers, we should look at what the advantages may be of reading or teaching a book such as this one, and how (or whether) *Bifocal* could be used to further anti-racist thought even despite its problems. The point is not to say that it *should* necessarily be used, but rather to ask what can be done with it, what can be learned from it, and how to foster readings that look critically at the book’s own messages. As Kempf (2008) argues with regards to the film *Crash*,

> For better or for worse, *Crash* is a powerful teaching tool. While I do not advocate for or against its use in the classroom, I do think that once the decision to use it has been reached, education that focuses on white accountability, complicity, and responsibility must take place. (p. 108)

A similar critical engagement with these issues must take place with *Bifocal* as well.

Ching (2005) contends that, although “the discourse of racial harmony nobly condemns bigotry, it has tangible limits,” because a discourse that “overlooks power […] cannot change the inequitable systemic structures and hierarchies that reproduce conditions in the material world” (p. 131). The limits of the “discourse of racial harmony” that *Bifocal* portrays have been discussed at length in previous chapters; while such a discourse may not be entirely wrong or completely worthless, it is at least insufficient; Ching later proposes that “[e]quality in multicultural children’s literature must affirm our common humanity and call attention to issues of power” (Ching, 2005, p. 135; emphasis in original). How, then, can we add to the salient discourse of racial harmony within *Bifocal* by “call[ing]ing] attention to issues of power,” as Ching advocates?

It is important, of course, to remain aware that readers have their own agency, and that they are able to look critically at the text; the problematic aspects of the book are not the only factors that determine its effects. Ku (2008) notes in her discussion of the film
Crash that “oppositional readings are possible. The viewer can refuse allegiance to the film and read the film itself as a practice of racism. She can produce new interpretations and meanings” (p. 67). Zine (2008) makes a similar point, arguing that:

Crash can yield important pedagogical opportunities for pushing students to delve into the film’s subtext and discover deeper sociological meanings. By questioning the film’s dominant message, raising contestations, and proposing alternative understandings, the film can be used as a powerful tool for media literacy. By challenging the face value of the film’s representation of contemporary racial politics, students can learn to become critical consumers of culture rather than passive spectators. This allows for a greater sense of agency in the role of the spectator to negotiate new meanings and question the commonsense of hegemonic assumptions. (p. 199)

These concepts can easily be applied to Bifocal, encouraging readers to look critically and actively at the messages that it conveys, and even to see the novel not only as a portrayal of racism, but also as a product of the systems of racism that it seeks to criticise.

One strategy for reading Bifocal would be to encourage readings that “denaturalize the spaces and identities that appear to come about organically” (Shujah, 2008, p. 152), and that involve “a meticulous historicization of the access, selection and reception of texts” (Taylor, 2007, p. 311). This can be done even for elements of the story that may be easily overlooked. What kind of power relations have to exist, for example, in order for Haroon to be repeatedly questioned by police despite having done nothing wrong, while Kevin, who actually does break the law while speeding, can express confidence that the police are “not interested in [him]” (Ellis & Walters, 2007, p. 28)? When Jay says that he knows few South Asian or Middle Eastern students because few of them “ever tried out for school teams,” a fact that he attributes to those students being “[t]oo busy studying” (Ellis & Walters, 2007, p. 32), might it be possible to ask
whether there might be other systemic factors dissuading these students from joining teams, especially given that we already know that Zana is a skilled basketball player (Ellis & Walters, 2007, p. 21)? Why is it that the predominantly Muslim area of the school has been “stuck” with the name “Brown Town,” when this name was first given to it by the “white” (non-Muslim) students, and is something that Haroon and his peers find “insulting” (Ellis & Walters, 2007, p. 53)? Asking questions that problematise the ways that social relationships in Bifocal come to appear natural is one way to expose the existing systems of power that inform the social relationships in the story.

Booth (2008) proposes a series of questions that readers should ask (p. 23), as a means of fostering critical literacy and critical understandings of the texts being read. Some of his questions – such as which voices are being silenced and which characters hold power – echo many of those seen previously, in the works of Ching (2005) and Paul (1998). Many of Booth’s other questions are more specifically tailored towards the reader’s response: “How might alternative perspectives be represented? […] Is the information in this text accurate and believable? […] How does this book help you to think about social issues and social justice?” (Booth, 2008, p. 23). Equipped with tools for critical literacy such as these, readers may be able to develop their own inventive and critical responses to some of the gaps in works such as Bifocal. For example, these questions may prompt students to challenge the credibility of the novel’s conclusion, and question whether establishing social justice is really as easy as the narrators imply.

Sensoy (2007) suggests two main strategies for encouraging readings that disrupt stereotypes and entrenchment of inequalities within the text. Her first principle is that of “self-focus,” which encourages the reader to look critically at themselves and their own
reactions, asking what it is that has led them to expect certain representations and to be surprised by others, rather than assuming that the representations that surprise are anomalies (pp. 362-363). Secondly, Sensoy proposes acting as “perspectives detectives,” asking “what else is going on? How else might we conceptualize ‘the problem’? And where and with whom is the problem located?” (Sensoy, 2008, p. 363; emphasis in original). This strategy, Sensoy (2007) argues, helps students understand the heterogeneity that exists within the groups being studied or depicted (p. 363). Sensoy’s focus is on “disrupting gendered Orientalism” (Sensoy, 2005, p. 361), and indeed her recommended approaches might be helpful for understanding Zana’s character, both as a way of questioning whether Zana’s agency should be seen as so exceptional, and as a way of seeing diversity among Zana’s female Muslim peers, even while they may be portrayed as a homogenous collective.

The practice of “testimonial reading” proposed by Boler is another useful reading strategy. In contrast to what she criticises as “passive empathy,” Boler (1999) advocates “testimonial reading” as a practice in which “the responsibility [is] borne by the reader” and “the reader accepts a commitment to rethink her own assumptions, and to confront the internal obstacles encountered as one’s views are challenged” (p. 164). This practice, she argues,

requires a self-reflective participation: an awareness first of myself as a reader, positioned in a relative position of power by virtue of the safe distance provided by the mediating text. Second, I recognize that reading potentially involves a task. This task is at minimum an active reading practice that involves challenging my own assumptions and world views. (Boler, 1999, p. 166)

Testimonial reading can allow for empathy, but only with an acknowledgement that the reader does not truly know the “other”; this form of reading “recognizes its own limits,
obstacles, ignorances, and zones of numbness” (Boler, 1999, p. 170). Applied to *Bifocal*, such practices can allow for students to feel themselves drawn into the story in an ethical way, one that provokes them to maintain a critical eye towards both themselves and the text, and to remain aware of their own privilege in relation to the story, and of their own responsibility to act on what they have read.

Jennifer’s discussion with her students, about her own discomfort when reading the scene involving Kevin’s racist tirade in the parking lot, may also prove to be a successful approach, especially for teachers who use this novel in their classrooms. By being frank with her students about her own anxiety when reading this scene aloud, Jennifer gave value to the affective responses that readers can have to these issues, demonstrating that it is okay to feel conflicted and that it is important to understand the power of the words that she was using; her discomfort itself demonstrates that the words have power even if there is no racist intention behind them. The interviews with both Jennifer and Hannah reflected an encouragement of the students’ visceral reactions of anger and indignation to many of *Bifocal*’s themes, which is also a useful strategy.

Jennifer’s encouragement to students to become emotionally engaged with their reading formed part of her overall teaching practice as well:

I always tell my students, when they’re reading, even if they’re reading independently, they need to have a conversation with the text as a reader. So they need to stop and say, “well, why is he doing that? How would I feel? Oh, that reminds me of when…” And even if you’re reading it on your own, they know, that’s always what I’ve advocated that good readers do, they have a conversation with the text, and they question, and they – you know, they get angry at certain parts, and, you know, want to throw the book down.

This invitation to become an active part of the process of their reading, and even to get angry with the text, can demonstrate to students that it is not necessary to simply accept a
text’s message at face value. As Strang (1992) argues, “[c]hildren should be encouraged to look upon themselves as active ‘meaning makers’… who can handle language and control words rather than be on the receiving end” (p. 16).

Writing about teaching *To Kill A Mockingbird* in “predominantly white, northern, suburban schools” (Megarry, 2004, p. 5), Megarry (2004) argues that teachers need to re-think some of our approaches to the book so that we consciously apply anti-racist principles in our classrooms. I submit that we need to: 1) begin looking at the text in terms of race. This means that we will need to examine whiteness as well as blackness and ask our students to try to define what it means to be white. We also need to 2) consciously avoid essentializing race ourselves, and point out where the novel might commit this fallacy. We need to 3) focus attention on the evidence of institutional racism, not just individual acts of racism in the book, and 4) challenge the notion that racism happened ‘back in the day’ or ‘down South,’ but doesn’t affect ‘us.’ (p. 5)

These principles can be similarly applied to *Bifocal*, especially when it is being used in the classroom, as a way for (especially white) teachers to reflect on the impact of their lessons related to race.

Several of the discussions about *Crash* address specifically the responsibilities of white educators to uncover and denaturalise the ways that whiteness is presented. Kempf (2008) describes the classroom as “an excellent site for critical whiteness analysis,” and argues that classroom discussions of white privilege can be “a powerful entry point for engaging students with notions of complicity, accountability, and responsibility” (p. 106). Promoting a “pedagogy of whiteness,” Brennan (2008) also proposes a useful framework for specifically addressing whiteness issues within the classroom:

Educators need to teach about whiteness as a dominating, controlling, and manipulative standard to which all ‘Others’ are compared and ranked. Although an antiracism pedagogy affords nonwhite students a place of difference and a voice of resistance and empowerment, a pedagogy of whiteness critiques and deconstructs the lens of privilege as a position that has subjugated, oppressed, and denied others voice, identity, and humanity. (p. 164)
The focus on whiteness that Kempf and Brennan both advocate can also be a way of moving beyond simplistic discussions of solving racism through making friends, towards a more profound acknowledgement of structures of oppression.

Kumashiro (2000) advocates similar principles on a broader level, suggesting a "'pedagogy of positionality’ that engages both students and teacher in recognizing and critiquing how one is positioned and how one positions others in social structures” (p. 37), and positing that “schools should engage students in the process of separating the normal from the self, significantly changing how they see themselves and who they are” (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 45). Applied to *Bifocal*, this strategy would entail looking deeply at the ways that both Haroon and Jay are positioned in the text, and the reasons for this positioning, as well as how this might apply to the students’ own lives. It also means decentralising the self as the norm to which *Bifocal*’s characters are compared.

Together, these reading strategies could profoundly change the ways that a book like *Bifocal* is received. As we saw to some degree with the reactions to Zana’s character, *Bifocal* readers can be challenged to question their existing knowledge and to interrogate the social structures that are made to seem natural in the text. They should also be free to extend their critique to the text itself, questioning the ways in which it might also reinforce existing oppressive structures. Readers should be encouraged to consider not only what they have in common with the characters in the novel, but also the meaning and significance of what differences exist between them and the novel’s characters; what does it mean that, although the students could imagine that it would be scary to be wrongfully arrested from their classroom, most of the students in both classes
that I discussed in this research are virtually certain of never having to be in that position? Considerations of difference should also cause readers to recognise their own limitations, and the ways that none of us can ever fully know each other’s experiences. Readers should be led to think about their own privilege, how this relates to how they perceive the text, and how they are complicit in the power structures that they might observe in the novel. In addition, they should come to consider the systemic nature of racism, and to interrogate issues of structural racism and the responses that such structures demand. Finally, *Bifocal* could be used as a way of provoking reflections on accountability and responsibility, and of inciting readers to act in response to the systems of racism around them, and the privileged positions in which they might find themselves.

As a novel, *Bifocal* presents some opportunities, and limits others, for talking, learning, and teaching about racism and Islamophobia in a Canadian context. Although some of its themes – for example, its discussion of racial profiling and police intimidation, and its portrayal of a young woman who wears *niqab* as an act not of compliance but of resistance – may present challenges to mainstream opinions about Canada and about Muslims, its liberal message that racism can be addressed simply through personal acts of transcending boundaries presents an unrealistic, and potentially harmful, image of what constitutes a valuable anti-racist effort. While the novel is very far from perfect – and perhaps more importantly, *because* the novel is being widely read and praised – it is necessary to find ways of engaging critically with its themes so that systems of power and oppression are exposed, and not elided.
REFERENCES


