

Discussion Prompt: McEwan discusses the risks and opportunities inherent in teaching racist texts, as well as how the ratio between those two factors can vary according to the demographic compositions of our classrooms and the instructor's own identifications. How do you weigh these considerations as you choose texts for your syllabus and then engage with them in the classroom? Are there other racist, misogynistic, heterosexist, etc., texts that you have assigned (or have been required to assign) and struggled with/through or found particularly useful in your own teaching practice?

Techniques for Responsibly Teaching Racist Texts

Teaching to the test means that “less emphasis is placed on courses and learning that allows the students to be pushed outside of their comfort realms to want to engage more freely in open discussions and collaborative projects.” What teaching tools promote this and how can we “use what we learn to try to balance our real life family and work responsibilities?” -Nicky

“I found myself resonating with statements like, ‘All of our screening choices are, on some level, endorsements of a given film,’ and think back to the media that I present...” -Sylvia

“What is the purpose of the class? What are the purposes of the students? What are my biases? What are theirs? What are my lived experiences and what are theirs? Which texts might be best suited to reflect these experiences? Which might be best suited to refract them?”
-Darren

“While I think McEwan is on-point in his explanation and usage of teaching *Birth of Nation*, I think he is also privileged. He comes of as progressive and thoughtful for teaching this way. I'm constantly weighing the consequences of coming off too black or angry or race-cardy when it comes to issues like this.” -Erica

“The relationship between affect and images, whether they be still or moving images, is fascinating and helped me to wonder what can be communicated through images that cannot be communicated through a text? How can using visual media in the classroom help raise conversations around antiblack racism and visual culture; more importantly, how can we use visuals to introduce affect theory (which is so related to teaching race and gender theory) to our undergrads? [...] I wonder how we might envision a framing practice that directly engages not only historical or cultural context, but also the affective context of a piece? How can we use students' affective relationship to a text to help frame their process of understanding and learning?” -Maxine

“I was thrilled to see McEwan embrace a ‘trigger warning’ approach to teaching *Birth of a Nation*; on the first page, he adamantly emphasizes that the class must include a preemptive discussion of the film and its contexts, its critiques and perspective. This, to me, is a crucial aspect of liberatory pedagogy. Not only does it provide accommodation for students struggling

with PTSD-spectrum trauma, but it lets students in on the motivations behind the texts we choose as instructors.” -Jesse

[While agreeing with Jesse, Cathy suggests that we carefully consider our terminology:] “I am fascinated and disturbed by the notion of ‘trigger warnings.’ First, I hate the term because I reject the notion of causal, one-to-one stimuli that automatically necessitate traumatized responses. That is far too simplistic an idea of what trauma is and how PTSD recurs. Like many aspects of cognition (the subject of my last book), we need a more culturally-informed and inflected and less bio-mechanical and reductionist understanding of trauma. [...] I call it ‘responsible teaching.’” -Cathy

“Question for the Visuality group: what do you do when there's a text that interests you and that you really don't want to have to discuss in class? How do you frame it? Are some things so offensive that no amount of framing allows you to address them directly? And what are the limits in an elective versus a required course? What are ways to build "elective assignments" and "alternative assignments" into a syllabus?” -Cathy

[On teaching *Ethnic Notions*] “I have felt compelled to show the film [...] partly because I like students to know that racial stereotypes have a somewhat traceable origin and partly because, honestly, I want them to be shocked awake by the film. This desire of mine is why I am cautious about showing it in class again—I do not want to manipulate my students. Let me elaborate: *I don't want to show or teach something in the hopes of getting a specific response.*” -Chy

“What of failing as a pedagogy? We so often want to get it *right*. Is there any *proper* in getting it wrong? *Can we find a home in messing things up?*” -Chy

“...But what matters most to me is that students have the sense to be angered and recognize that this silent film really isn't really that silent. I don't ever want to not feel dread by the film. McEwan usually acts as my guiding reminder of what I need to do to get in and out. *Coonskin* affects me differently. I feel purged and overjoyed when it's done. I know intimately whom and what the film is targeting and I know that it's not me. I wonder whether every class I've ever taught is simply a chain of triggers but never warnings.” -Michael

Film Blackness Discussion Questions

“I have so many questions about "authenticity" and the burden of representation. How do reproduction and authenticity interrelate in film-space?” -Jesse

“To what degree did the film seem more interested in Micah than in Jo? How do we map a gendered reading onto our raced reading of the characters and film? And how did the film and Michael's chapter negotiate the tension between (and I'm aware that I'm employing a potentially false dichotomy here) the film as story-about-character and the film as argument-about-race?

I'm puzzling over the implications of what I felt as a divide in the two texts' interest in the characters as symbols and the characters as characters." -Darren

"But what if roaming, like it was for Micah in *Medicine*, is just the search for home / a "proper"? What is troubling about searching for a proper is that there is no guarantee that one will find it. And—if you are operating from a void—like Micah is, how could you be sustained, knowing that there may not be a proper to find?" -Chy

"Do we hold filmmakers and other artists of color more "responsible" to representing "the race" than we do white artists? Why? And should we? What about women (white women? women of color?) What do these questions tell us about identity in general?" -Cathy