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“What did she see?” The White Gaze and Postmodern Triple Consciousness in Walter Dean Myers’s *Monster*

Tim Engles and Fern Kory



Michael Cart insightfully describes Walter Dean Myers’s young adult novel *Monster*, which won the first Michael L. Printz Award in 2000, as a reflection of “adult America’s abiding distrust of teenagers, especially those of color” (76). As we will demonstrate, it also offers an insightful depiction of the effects of a hegemonic white gaze on young black men like Myers’s protagonist, sixteen-year-old Steve Harmon, who comes face to face with the whitened perspectives of the allegedly objective criminal justice system when he is arrested, imprisoned, and put on trial for felony murder. We will argue that in *Monster*, Myers is as concerned with bringing this whitened perspective to the attention of teen readers—by depicting the psychic damage it causes his protagonist—as he is with depicting Steve’s effort “to regain the moral awareness that he has allowed to elude him” by agreeing to take part in a crime (Myers, Preface 1). Complicating Steve’s struggle with the fraught question of responsibility for the results of his actions is the additional difficulty of maintaining a coherent sense of self in the context of a legal system in which people are often prejudged based on their age and skin color. In response to this prejudicial context, Steve is moved to comment: “I want to feel like I’m a good person because I believe I am. But being in here with these guys makes it hard to think about yourself as being different. We look about the same, and even though I’m younger than they are, it’s hard not to notice that we are all pretty young” (Myers, *Monster* 62–63). Published in 1999 and set around the same time, *Monster*’s primary focus, like that of so many young adult novels, is the protagonist’s evolving identity, but Myers explores this conventional theme in a particularly charged racial context, one that precipitates Steve’s full-blown identity crisis. On the first page, Steve responds to his reflection in the mirror

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in his jail cell: "When I look into the small rectangle, I see a face looking back at me but I don't recognize it. It doesn't look like me" (1). Unfortunately for Steve, the contrasts between the multiple competing versions of himself that arise, combined with the stresses of his captivity, begin to confuse him; as a result, at a fundamental psychic level, he undergoes an identity crisis that destabilizes his hitherto unquestioned sense of what sort of person he is.

The situation Steve faces is mortally serious: a Harlem shopkeeper has been robbed and killed, and because he was implicated in the crime, Steve has been charged with felony murder and could face the death penalty, despite his status as a minor and his relatively small role in the tragedy. A compounding factor that Myers more subtly examines is the subsumed, de facto white supremacist framework of the US judicial system. Ruth Wilson Gilmore writes that racism within this context is definable as "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" (247). As numerous studies document, for young black men like Steve the racist forces arrayed against them in the judicial context make a guilty verdict more likely.¹

In a quantitative study of the "interactive effects of race, gender, and age in the sentencing of criminal defendants," Darrell Steffensmeier, Jefferey Ulmer, and John Kramer found that defendants who occupy Steve's three most salient identity categories (young, black, and male) "are sentenced more harshly than defendants who are female, white, and middle-aged or elderly. . . . Young black males receive the most severe sentences of any race-age-gender category" (788). The likelihood of a death penalty is also greater. As Angela J. Davis writes in her study of prosecutorial misconduct, *Arbitrary Justice*, "African Americans, who are only 12 percent of the population, were 34 percent of the total number of persons executed as of December 14, 2005" (81). In an interview, Myers demonstrated his awareness of the societal forces at work for young men: "The idea that a Black person is on trial can bring up the unconscious racial feeling that a Black defendant is 'more likely' to be guilty than a white defendant" ("Questions" 9).² Steve's burden, then, as his white lawyer Kathy O'Brien repeatedly reminds him, is to present a version of himself that lays to rest that "unconscious racial feeling," a burden not carried, or carried to lesser degrees, by young male suspects who are perceived racially as something other than black.

Throughout his doubly self-narrated account, Steve depicts himself as struggling to reconcile his sense that he is "a good person" (62) with his understanding that in the eyes of many, his black male status alone makes him exactly the kind of person who would take part in a robbery that leads to murder. In both his screenplay and his journal, the stresses and dangers of his position motivate and complicate the way Steve presents himself and the crime of which he stands accused. Steve comes to understand that he is being read through a raced, classed, gendered, and age-related lens, which inserts him into the role of dehumanized "monster," a character who bears little relation to the person he has understood himself to be. Most suspects likely suffer erosion of their

individuality, as the system throws them together with the similarly accused, assigns them a number, and generally treats them like cattle. However, as Khalil Gibran Muhammad points out, “The ‘black man’ in America may be the most enduring and potent symbol of criminality in modern American history” (73). Myers dramatizes how a presumption of guilt heightens the threat of identity erasure for young black male suspects. In *Monster*, the prejudicial white gaze surveils African American youth, imposing illicit identities to which they often must respond with strategic performances of nonthreatening blackness, thereby developing doubled and even tripled forms of self-consciousness.

Postmodern Multicultural Discourse

As Jodi Melamed points out in *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism*, multicultural literature has been commonly deployed in the service of what amounts to liberal, state-sanctioned antiracism. Since the Second World War, successive waves of multicultural sentiment and practice have taken the form of additive, celebratory, and largely cosmetic practices. While these modes of “tolerance” have encouraged racial awareness and connection, they have not encouraged effective resistance to institutional racism and the broader forces of entrenched hegemonic oppression. Reading multicultural literature ethnographically, as a window into “other” peoples and cultures, does not necessarily lead to a productive critical assessment of the contemporary social structure. Contemporary young adult literature also has been seen as a means of providing a more engagingly relevant reflection of reality from a variety of perspectives, and readers of young adult literature are often invited by both writers and teachers “to identify with the main characters and their struggles and hence learn about themselves” (Alsup 9). But this reader-response orientation does not necessarily encourage readers to do the critical work of appreciating the systemic reasons characters may experience life differently from how they themselves do. As Janet Alsup argues, “[t]he recognition of these differences, or the so-called ‘gap’ between the readers’ real life and the world created in the text, is essential to [the development of] the reader who is able to both *experience* a textual world and to *view* it with distanced aesthetic awareness as a creation of the author’s imagination” (11; emphasis in original).

Similarly, it is not enough for white readers of books with minority protagonists to be encouraged to empathize, another mode of identification. As Ann Jurecic points out, “one may read a novel that portrays the trauma caused by systemic urban violence in an American city and imagine that one understands the experience, but such identification can prevent one from recognizing one’s own complicity with the social and political structures that engender this violence” (11). By dramatizing the identity-warping and identity-erasing effects of a whitened gaze on the psyche of a young black male, Myers invites readers

to move beyond affective identification or distanced tolerance of others and engage more critically with some of the pernicious manifestations of white hegemony and institutional racism.

Monster's two-pronged narrative structure reflects the complexity of Steve Harmon's rhetorical situation. In the handwritten journal entry that begins the novel, Steve writes that his life seems like "a strange movie with no plot and no beginning" (3). Expressing a need to "make sense of" and "block out" the experience, he decides to occupy his mind by representing the experience in a screenplay, which becomes the novel's primary narrative mode. The result is a postmodern narrative that invites readers to question each adjusted sense of identity formed, and performed, by its protagonist.³ It also invites consideration of how young adult readers who are presumed to be "like" Steve (at least in terms of age) read someone "like" him (in terms of gender and race) who has been arrested for felony murder. By novel's end, careful readers will have gathered that although Steve repeatedly distances himself from his crime and does win an acquittal, he is guilty as charged. Nevertheless, *Monster* compels readers to judge Steve's case more self-consciously than they might otherwise because it provides both explicit and subtle commentary on the latent racism of the American judicial system. It does so through two distinct modes of narration: Steve's journal, which seems to offer direct access to an emotional truth, and his film script, which offers an overtly crafted telling of his story.

In a metanarrative mode that challenges normative reading practices of minority-authored literature, this novel encourages readers to attend more fully to their own reading practices than they need to do when reading more conventional texts. As Susan Lee Groenke and Michelle Youngquist write, such works "require readers to 'coauthor' texts. . . . Indeed, in works like *Monster*, it is up to the reader to fill in gaps and pull together the discrete parts or narrative strands that seemingly run amok" (507). As a result of this engaging complexity, *Monster* provokes many forms of reader response, including sympathy for the vulnerability of a young man whose first journal entry explains that "[t]he best time to cry is at night, when the lights are out and someone is being beaten up and screaming for help" (1). To some extent, individual reader responses to the more racially charged aspects of Steve's plight will depend on socially defined and lived identities. Depending on their positioning in relation to a legacy of white supremacy, readers are likely to respond with differing senses of complicity or empathy when Steve is "handcuffed to a U-bolt put in [a] bench for that purpose" (14) and later "unshackled" (16). Readers of color may identify with the protagonist's efforts to negotiate with a white racial gaze on himself, while white readers may identify with, or defensively resist identifying with, the white characters who bear and enact that hegemonic gaze.

Ultimately, Myers's depiction in *Monster* of contemporary racial dynamics can prod all readers to become more alert to the extent to which race influences their judgment of Steve, since evidence beyond a reasonable doubt is elusive for most of the novel. When asked in an interview why "he left Steve's innocence

or guilt ambiguous in the book,” Myers replied, “I wanted the reader, given the facts of the case and having the benefit of Steve’s inner thoughts, to reach their own decision” (“Questions” 8). Certainly the evidence for Steve’s complicity in the crime is communicated in ways that require readers to engage actively with issues raised by the text. Security camera-style photographs that show Steve inside the store are interpolated into a section of his script in which two inmates discuss with him the meaning of “truth” for people caught up in the justice system. Hovering above the photo on the first of these script pages and below the image on the second page are questions in Steve’s handwriting: “What was I doing?” (220) and “What was I thinking?” (221). In the rehearsed testimony that follows this discussion, Steve flatly denies having discussed the crime (223), a claim that does not align with a scene earlier in the script in which King asks him to be the lookout (150). Finally, even the action Steve is accused of taking as lookout is ambiguous, as his attorney points out to the jury: “If someone was to make sure that the drugstore was clear, he or she made a bad job of it. Remember it was the State that proved that the drugstore wasn’t clear. And do you remember the signal that Mr. Evans said he received? He said that Steven came out of the drugstore and didn’t signal that anything was wrong. In other words, there was no signal” (247). For the jury and for readers, there are no easy answers.

In similarly ambiguous terms, the question arises of how readers render their own verdict, given the difficulty posed by the courtroom evidence as Steve presents it, by his refusal or inability to say that he is guilty, and by the jury’s decision that he is “not guilty.” In myriad ways, Myers’s novel suggests that despite this particular jury’s judgment, assessments of guilt are often made—and often quickly made—on the basis of firmly embedded notions and fears about black men. To put it another way, *Monster* challenges readers to judge Steve’s guilt or innocence in ways that are uninfected and uninflected by the white supremacist notions and tendencies displayed by various adult characters. Myers aims this rhetorical thrust primarily at privileged wielders of the white gaze, but the novel’s complex vision of contemporary racial dynamics encourages introspection by all readers.

To the extent that this novel is about common “readings” of young black men, it calls attention to how they can be misread. In the reading of this courtroom drama that we suggest in this essay, *Monster* does not centrally concern itself with the mystery of whether Steve is guilty as charged, nor with the question of whether he deserves to suffer a penalty so pointedly disproportionate to his role in a crime that tragically misfires. The question of Steve’s guilt is ultimately resolvable by careful readers, but its ambiguity gestures toward bigger questions about white hegemony, such as how being treated as less than human might make young black men regard themselves, and how that distorted self-regard might even encourage some of them—Steve’s codefendant, perhaps?—to commit the crimes they are already widely presumed to have committed. This story about a beleaguered individual might be read as a warning about the poor

choices that Steve Harmon made, but it also reads as an indictment or exposé of a racist judicial system that targets and abuses particular individuals based on the assumption that “they” are all alike. Myers’s achievement in *Monster* is that he requires readers to consider not only their own tendencies to prejudge others, but also the broader hegemonic forces that contort the identities and threaten the lives of young black men.⁴

Prosecutorial Racism and Postmodern Triple Consciousness

Both Steve and his attorney understand that an imposed identity freighted with assumptions renders him an especially suspected suspect. In O’Brien’s blunt phrasing, “You’re young, you’re Black, and you’re on trial. What else do they need to know?” (78). At other points, Steve demonstrates his own growing awareness of the power of such race-based prejudgments in the trial setting, as he does in the journal entry in which he analyzes a particular strategy deployed by the prosecutor:

Miss O’Brien says that Petrocelli is using Bolden’s testimony as part of a trail that will lead to me and James King. I think she is wrong. I think they are bringing out all of these people and letting them look terrible on the stand and sound terrible and then reminding the jury that they don’t look any different from me and King. (59–60)

In an argument that “prosecutorial racism” needs better monitoring and assessment during judicial proceedings, Elizabeth L. Earle writes, “As American society has matured, blatant forms of racism have increasingly been replaced by newer, more elusive, but equally injurious forms of derision” (1222). As Earle’s analysis of a prosecutor’s racially charged courtroom diction suggests, prosecutors can readily “focus the jury on race [in order] to divert its sympathies from the defendant to the victim,” and calling a series of people to the stand because they resemble a black defendant primarily in terms of age and race is one way to do so (1241).⁵ Steve’s suspicion that Petrocelli is encouraging guilt by racial association is quite plausible. Indeed, readers can see that the defense attorneys recognize this prosecutorial strategy when Briggs, the lawyer for Steve’s codefendant, objects to Prosecutor Petrocelli’s use of terminology commonly associated with “urban” youth:

PETROCELLI [to Osvaldo]

Do you know as a matter of fact if Bobo has hurt anyone in the hood?

BRIGGS

Objection! Unless the prosecutor is going to pass out glossaries to the jury, I want her to use standard English.

JUDGE

Overruled. (83)

Briggs's demand that the language of the courtroom be restricted to "standard English" is an attempt to level the playing field for his client by deflecting associations between him and a racially charged geographical setting. Interestingly, the judge rejects the implicit argument that those who sit in judgment cannot understand the language of "the hood." Still, in practical terms, the result is that Petrocelli's tactic of tarring all these young men with the same brush receives judicial approval, validating Steve's recognition of the racism underlying this strategy.

In such moments, Steve demonstrates his understanding of the causes and effects of "double consciousness," the persistent phenomenon described by W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) as "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (2). In both narrative modes, Steve delineates and analyzes the prejudging, ontologically obliterating powers of the white gaze focused on a person of color. His screenplay and journal also provide demonstrations of Steve's understanding that in order to survive the effects of the judicial system's white gaze, he needs to fashion what amounts to a third mode of identity, an "acceptably black" presentation of self.

On a fundamental level, Du Bois's conception of a multiplied black identity remains a viable heuristic for explicating the particularly burdened sense of self that the hegemonic white gaze inflicts on nonwhite people. In *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race*, philosopher George Yancy updates Du Bois's formulation by attempting to "disarticulate" the workings and effects of "the white imaginary" as it focuses on black men like himself. "What is 'seen,'" Yancy asks, "when the white gaze 'sees' my body and it becomes something alien to me?" (69). In terms that echo the central thematic concerns of *Monster*—which begins and ends with its protagonist trying to come to terms with a white woman's rejection of their common humanity—Yancy writes: "The corporeal integrity of my Black body undergoes an onslaught as the white imaginary, which centuries of white hegemony have structured and shaped, ruminates over my dark flesh and vomits me out in a form not in accordance with how I see myself" (2); and later, that "[t]he Black self is always already formed through discourse, through various practices that 'confirm' the Black self as ugly, bestial, dirty, and worthless" (191).

Beginning with the paradigmatic scene of a white woman in an elevator who tightens into herself in response to his presence, Yancy explicates the invasive powers still wielded by a general perception that the mere presence of a black person poses a threat. Such pervasive conceptions can be difficult to resist, making it a struggle to perceive and maintain a separate and more genuine sense of selfhood; Alexander G. Weheliye argues that "The look of the white subject interpellates the black subject as inferior, which, in turn, bars the black subject from seeing him/herself without the internalization of the white gaze" (qtd. in Yancy 67). Yancy recalls being a black male teenager with career aspirations of becoming a pilot, hopes that he shared with a high school math teacher. This

white man “looked at” Yancy, and then suggested that he “be realistic (a code word for *realize* that I am Black)” by pursuing work as a carpenter or bricklayer instead (67; emphasis in original). Yancy examines similar moments in the lives of other black people, who also report feeling pinned down and invasively defined by white bearers of an inspecting and at times disciplining gaze; all report as well a consequent, vexed self-questioning, which Yancy describes as “a destructive process of superfluous self-surveillance and self-interrogation” (68). “There is nothing passive,” he adds, “about the white gaze” (69).

In *Monster*, Myers depicts Steve performing a similar, seemingly obsessive inspection of his own corporeal being and the conceptions that others seem to hold of it. At the end of Steve’s screenplay he presents himself as an “image . . . in black and white” with “the grain . . . nearly broken” that “looks like one of the pictures they use for psychological testing, or some strange beast, a monster” (276). As this narrativized image suggests, *Monster* is a racial Rorschach text for readers. Many of the photos and the one drawing embedded in the novel, all of which depict Steve, call attention to his bodily appearance. They also evoke common ways of looking at young black men. The formats of these images—mug shots, grainy surveillance-camera stills, a photo of Steve slumped in a police car, another with his face pixelated, and a courtroom sketch—recreate common, media-generated modes of representation by which images of black men reach and influence ordinary consumers of postmodern culture. In effect, the standardization-through-repetition of these formats makes them the readily available frames in which to imagine people who are supposedly like Steve, with their connotations of criminality encouraging us to “frame” them in another sense, by assuming (or at least strongly suspecting) their guilt.

The ontological *cri de coeur* in Steve’s last journal entry is in part a response to this sinister, hegemonic perception of himself, which the trial has pushed him to better perceive and understand:

That is why I take the films of myself. I want to know who I am. I want to know the road to panic that I took. I want to look at myself a thousand times to look for one true image. When Miss O’Brien looked at me, after we had won the case, what did she see that caused her to turn away?

What did she see? (281; emphasis in original)

By closing the novel with this depiction of his protagonist’s obsession over O’Brien’s inscrutable perspective, Myers emphasizes that Steve’s unwillingness to accept personal responsibility for the robbery and its tragic outcome is—like his general confusion about whether he is a monster or a man—a response to the identity-distorting white gaze. As Du Bois further elaborates in his explanation of African American double consciousness, the dis-integrating effects of the white gaze inspire a “longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge [one’s] double self into a better and truer self” (2). As a sixteen-year-old who agreed to abet robbery because neighborhood peers questioned his manhood

(calling him “faggot” [81]) and his credibility (saying “you ain’t got the heart to be nothing but a lame” [82]), Steve made a critical error when he chose to prove himself in the terms they dictated.⁶ One of Myers’s apparent goals in this novel is to demonstrate that, as one reviewer put it, “the road from innocence to trouble is comprised of small, almost invisible steps, each involving an experience in which a ‘positive moral decision’ was not made” (Review). But because Steve assiduously rejects the prejudicial conception of people “like” himself as “monsters” who callously commit felonies and murder, he cannot finally reconcile that conception with his own more banal story.

Conversely, as both Yancy and Myers also demonstrate, many people of color subjected to the white gaze exercise conscious autonomy within its constraints by recognizing and rejecting its insistent claims and by returning the gaze, examining and understanding its bearers and at times attempting to manipulate them toward various ends. If we read *Monster* in this light, we can see that while Steve is under systemic constraints when presenting himself in court, he is able to re-present himself both in court and artistically as a sympathetic “character,” the young man described by *VOYA* reviewer Avis Matthews whose “youthful vulnerable voice will draw in YA readers, boys and girls.” In effect, Steve increasingly understands and acts upon the need to hold onto not only his own “true” sense of himself and the prejudicial one, but also the (preferable because) sympathetic one.

Early in the novel, Steve interpolates a scene from a film workshop within his screenplay (18–19), thereby establishing his credentials as a good student, suggesting a set of storytelling skills, and introducing the twin themes of judgment and prejudice. As Steve’s film teacher (and later, character witness) says, in terms that can be productively applied to Steve’s writing, “When you make a film, you leave an impression on the viewers, who serve as a kind of jury for your film. If you make your film predictable, they’ll make up their minds about it long before it’s over” (19). This insight emphasizes the challenge that Steve faces as a filmmaker, since he needs to tell his story in such a way that his involvement in this crime seems less a foregone conclusion than his audience is predisposed to believe. Following a “CUT TO: COURTROOM” where “we see the JURORS filing in and taking their seats,” Steve asks O’Brien whether she thinks they “look all right”; she replies, “They are what we have as a jury. We have to deal with them” (20). For Steve and for readers, it is already becoming clear that his fate hinges on a successful performance of an “acceptably black” version of himself, one that convinces bearers of the white imagination that despite his blackness, he is as fully human as they are.

In an *Ad Age* article, columnist Bob Garfield defines this concept, which gained further currency when Barack Obama was first running for president:

Acceptably black means being nonthreatening to white people inclined to feeling threatened by black people. It means standard English, clean-cut appearance (or, as Joe Biden fumbled [in reference to Obama], “clean”), and the most

Caucasian features possible. These obviously are not objective measures of character or worth; just as obviously, they are measures of what sells to the vast, white audience.⁷

Aside from his apparently purposeful presentation of self in these terms, both in court and in his writings, Steve also notices the acceptable blackness of others, such as a “pretty” female juror and a “light-skinned Black” newscaster on television (99, 120). Again, what Steve comes to realize in the spotlight of the white gaze is that the possibility of his acquittal, and thus of his very survival, rests on the performance of a third version of himself, an acceptably black one.

The Steve Harmon to whom Myers gives voice is thus a representative character, at least insofar as his age and race trigger institutional racism. Significantly, he has also been read as an exceptional young man: “the good guy of the four [accused accomplices]—no criminal record, a promising member of the school film club, a loving son and brother” (Matthews). It is worth noting that this description of Steve reflects a web of choices made by Myers, who must—like his narrator and his narrator’s attorney—face the racially inflected rhetorical challenges associated with representing a young black male who is on trial. For many reasons, then, it is not surprising that in the courtroom drama Steve depicts, much of the focus is on how various players manipulate language to create both a winning story and a winning persona. We see this focus when Steve’s attorney tells him how to act at the beginning of the novel (“When you’re in court, you sit there and you pay attention. You let the jury know that you think the case is as serious as they do. You don’t turn and wave to any of your friends. It’s all right to acknowledge your mother” [13])—and when she practices his testimony with him near the end (“When I like the answers you give me, I’ll leave the cup facing up. When I don’t like the answers, I’ll turn it upside down. You figure out what’s wrong with the answer you gave me” [218]). Such practical, strategizing moments are suited to a novel composed largely of courtroom drama, and they dramatize the layers of rehearsed performative storytelling that take place in this setting. But Myers is also creating a context in which readers can see his young protagonist conceiving and enacting his own performative strategies for self-presentation, which add further insight to *Monster’s* multifaceted depiction of agential black subjectivity.

We see an explicitly self-conscious appeal to Steve’s imagined audience early in the script, when his imagined film fades out of his cell and into the living room of his “neatly furnished, clean” home to a flashback, a scene in which he is watching television with his younger brother. When eleven-year-old Jerry asks if Steve “would ever want to be a superhero? You know, save people and stuff?” Steve replies, “Sure. You know who I’d want to be? Superman. I’d be wearing glasses and stuff and people would be messing with me and then I’d kick butt” (58). In his journal, Steve comments on the effect of his artistic choices here on an imagined viewer: “I like the last scene in the movie, the one between me and Jerry. It makes me seem like a real person” (60). Steve’s

awareness of his racially fraught predicament motivates him to find opportunities to demonstrate his own capacity for emotions, including empathy, that will in turn inspire empathy in others.

Empathy and Triple Consciousness

In a concise description of the complex rhetorical goals of *Monster*, Matthews writes, “The author wants young readers to serve as jurors and simultaneously to put themselves in Steve’s place.” Readers of works aimed at a young adult audience are assumed to have age-related points of connection with a teen narrator. However, the extent to which white people in general can empathize with people of color remains an open question among researchers, scholars, and activists who have addressed the issue,⁸ so there is reason to question the result of asking majority-culture readers “to put themselves in Steve’s place.” White attempts to read the literature of racial minorities empathetically can end up as circuitous, narcissistic, and illusory, as readers focus on that which apparently resembles themselves, rather than what marks and makes others different from them. Such striving is also an excessively individualistic orientation, if attention to larger social and institutional forces that affect for good and ill the lives of both people of color and white people are left in a hazy background.

The ostensibly laudable emotional work of reading empathetically can also divert readers who do not share the book’s cultural perspective from the intellectual work of seeing themselves from the positions of others. In addition to provoking a better understanding of the identity-corroding effects of a hegemonic white gaze on nonwhite subjectivity in the context of the criminal justice system, Myers provides white readers of *Monster* with an opportunity to see their own privilege reflected in Steve’s depictions of relatively empowered white characters. As a filmmaker, Steve is in a position not only to provide evidence of his own capacity for empathy, but also to demonstrate the monstrous callousness of various wielders of the white gaze.

As a black suspect subject to the presumptive and disciplinary scrutiny of that gaze, Steve’s racial burden is to demonstrate convincingly that he has this higher human capacity; lacking it would make him that much more like the “monster” that a black male suspect is widely presumed to be. Historians, psychologists, and others have long argued that a persistent misconception whites have had of blacks, and to varying degrees of other people of color, is that they lack the full range of apparent human emotions, especially such “higher” ones as compassion and empathy.⁹ Steve’s white lawyer tells him early on that her job “is to make you a human being in the eyes of the jury” (16). At another point, he suspects that she is specifically testing his emotional capacities when she makes sure that he has a chance to look at pictures of the murdered storekeeper (91). In the same journal entry in which Steve records this suspicion, he presents himself as aware that he has been so self-absorbed lately that he has not really given his parents much thought, and he takes a moment to “wonder what [his mother is] thinking” (91).

Most depictions of empathy in Steve's journal are presumably intended to be read as more mimetic than strategic, as when he writes that "[t]he pictures of Mr. Nesbitt scare me. I think about him lying there knowing he was going to die. I wonder if it hurt him much" (128). But then again, Steve reports in his journal that O'Brien has "warned" him "not to write anything in [his] notebook that [he] did not want the prosecutor to see" (137). This revelation immediately follows a scene in the script in which Steve presents a stark contrast between his own empathetic response to Mr. Nesbitt's death and the lack of feeling displayed by James King, who is accused of shooting the storekeeper during a struggle over his gun. The scene ends with the prosecuting attorney posing a question about the medical testimony in a voice over:

VO (Petrocelli)

You mean he literally drowned in his own blood?

REACTION SHOT: STEVE catches his breath sharply.

REACTION SHOT: KING has head tilted to one side, seemingly without a care. (136)

The primary effect of this scene is to differentiate Steve from King, evoking for Steve's audience(s) the acceptable blackness that his attorney has articulated as necessary to success in the courtroom.

Steve's script also depicts wielders of the white gaze as lacking in empathy, sometimes monstrously so. In one scene, the white detective, Karyl, discusses with his black partner, Williams, the possibility that Steve could be given the death penalty:

KARYL: The victim was well respected in the neighborhood. Hardworking Black guy, worked his way up.

WILLIAMS: This guy's only 16. They won't kill him.

KARYL: What are you, a pessimist? Hope for the best. (72)

In his journal and his script, Steve makes it possible for readers to see that his own attorney also demonstrates a remarkable disregard for his individuality and humanity. While it is perhaps unsurprising that the prosecuting attorney does not linger over testimony that highlights Steve's activities as a filmmaker (232), it is difficult to understand why Defense Attorney O'Brien exhibits a similar lack of interest. Early on, she does ask Steve what he is doing with his notebook, but when he describes an activity that would be remarkable of any teenager—"I'm writing this whole thing down as a movie"—she dismisses his precocity with a breezy "Whatever" (16). Readers are not privy to O'Brien's consciousness, but peers who are less inclined to be dismissive of Steve's capabilities will be able

to imagine the racist, classist, or ageist presumptions that could preclude the possibility that Steve's perspective on the proceedings has value.

As depicted by Steve, his attorney is also insensitive to the possibility that raced and classed privilege smoothed her path. After she shares with him some personal details, Steve provides commentary that highlights the difference between her expectations from life and his: "It sounded like a good life even though she said it like it was nothing special" (93). And although O'Brien has articulated her awareness of the pernicious racial dynamics at play in the contemporary justice system, she chooses to elide past and present injustices when she suggests in her opening statement to the jury that "the wonder and beauty of the American system of justice" is that "[w]e don't drag people out of their beds in the middle of the night and lynch them. We don't torture people. We don't beat them. We apply the law equally to both sides. The law that protects society protects all of society" (26).¹⁰

Each of these moments captured by Steve sheds additional light on the racial underpinnings of O'Brien's final rejection of him. Having been declared innocent, Steve "spreads his arms to hug O'BRIEN, but she stiffens and turns to pick up her papers" (276). In the end, O'Brien may be a good-willed but socially conditioned white woman, who recoils from hugging a young man at least in part because his blackness makes it difficult for her to embrace him as fully human. As Steve's subtly insightful descriptions of her words, actions, and attitudes suggest, her status as a white person influences her perceptions of and reactions to others, causing her to demonstrate the identification deficit that has been projected onto Steve and his codefendant. Ultimately, ironically, and perhaps unsurprisingly, Steve's successful performance of a third, acceptably black version of himself has failed to win over the very person who helped him construct it.

As recent advocates of critical multiculturalism point out, *de facto* white supremacy continues to structure the social order in the United States, functioning as the subsumed legacy of the history of racialization and thus allowing "for an overarching and unequal system of capital accumulation by inscribing race on bodies as a marker of their relative value or valuelessness" (Melamed 7). As Stephen May and Christine E. Sleeter point out, in terms of individual identity construction, "individuals and groups are inevitably shaped and constrained by one's position(ing) in the wider society, a product in turn of power relations. . . . [Identities] are inevitably located, and often *differentially* constrained, by wider structural forces" (6; emphasis in original). The corrosive effects on youth of color of this relational, hierarchically abusive reality are perhaps most egregiously exemplified by those ensnared within the criminal justice system. Despite a widespread belief that the United States is post-racial, a hegemonic regime continues to target young black men in particular, and over the past few decades the embedded racism that structures the criminal justice system has grown worse. Thanks in large part to the political and cultural

deployment of criminalizing stereotypes and the concomitant, racialized “War on Drugs,” an entrenched array of laws and institutional practices specifically persecute nonwhite urban youth, resulting in racially disproportionate arrest rates, rates of sentencing, and lengths of sentences. As Loïc Wacquant notes, “the expansion and intensification of the activities of the police, courts, and prison over the past quarter-century have been finely targeted by class, ethnicity, and place, leading to what is better referred to as the *hyper*-incarceration of one particular category: lower-class black men in the crumbling ghetto” (59; emphasis in original).

Racialized suspicions of young black men are hegemonic in part because they are held not only by card-carrying racists but also by avowedly good-willed, well-meaning white people and to some extent by many people of color. In *Monster*, prejudicial perceptions of young black males like Steve Harmon complicate and confuse the perceptions and actions of most of the novel’s primary characters, including the protagonist himself. Myers delineates such confusions in ways that demonstrate many of the proclivities commonly induced in both white and nonwhite people by the naturalized whiteness that structures so much of the social order.

As scholars of both adult and youth literature have demonstrated, the works of nonwhite authors merit attention for providing insight into the ways of white people and white hegemony, particularly from beleaguered perspectives. Such scholars emphasize that literature by nonwhite writers can be read for something other than what many readers expect to find in it, which tends to be insight into the experience of members of a particular racial group (usually that of the nonwhite author) or conversely, examples of “universal” experience. In *Monster*, Myers effectively reverses the racial lens, exemplifying the potential of young adult fiction to engage readers in productive scrutiny of the hegemonic white gaze.

Notes

We would like to acknowledge the guidance and inspiration generously provided by James Kilgore, Jane M. Marshall, and Lisa Spanierman.

1. For recent extended analysis of the de facto white supremacy that continues to structure the criminal justice system, see Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*; Michael Roy Hames-García, *Fugitive Thought: Prison Movements, Race, and the Meaning of Justice*; Christopher Hartney and Fabiana Silva, *And Justice for Some: Differential Treatment of Youth of Color in the Justice System*; Khalil Gibran Muhammad, “Where Did All the White Criminals Go? Reconfiguring Race and Crime on the Road to Mass Incarceration”; and Glenn C. Loury, et al., *Race, Incarceration, and American Values*.

2. For empirical support of Myers’s observation, see Samuel R. Sommers and Phoebe C. Ellsworth, “‘Race Salience’ In Juror Decision-Making: Misconceptions, Clarifications, and Unanswered Questions.”

3. In their examination of Steve's identity quest, Susan Lee Groenke and Michelle Youngquist note that in postmodern literature,

Identity is often treated more as a "bricolage," or the "rag-tag collection of disparate elements that communicates not unity but plurality" (Graybill, p. 243). . . . Traditional, or modernist, young adult novels tend to act as "quest" narratives, in which the adolescent protagonists search for some kind of "psychic wholeness" and an "authentic self." . . . By novel's end, a coherent self usually emerges. However, in *Monster*, Steve—besieged by competing discourses that vie for one's identity—never locates a coherent self. (506)

4. Scholarly analysis of white hegemony and common individual white tendencies as depicted in young adult literature and literature commonly taught to young adults includes, in reverse chronological order, Naomi Lesley, "Solar Systems and Power Systems: Decentering the Naturalized Universe in Virginia Hamilton's *The Planet of Junior Brown*" (2011); Angela Shaw-Thornburg, "On Reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*: Fifty Years Later" (2010); Meredith Goldsmith, "White Skin, White Mask: Passing, Posing, and Performing in *The Great Gatsby*" (2003); John Alberti, "The Nigger Huck: Race, Identity, and the Teaching of *Huckleberry Finn*" (1995); Rudine Sims Bishop, *Shadow and Substance: Afro-American Experience in Contemporary Children's Fiction* (1982); and Nancy Larrick, "The All-White World of Children's Books" (1965).

There is a more extensive lineage of scholarly analysis of these tendencies as depicted in adult literature by African American authors. Key works include Victoria Burrows, *Whiteness and Trauma: The Mother-Daughter Knot in the Fiction of Jean Rhys, Jamaica Kincaid and Toni Morrison*; Jane Davis, *The White Image in the Black Mind: A Study of African American Literature*; Laura Dubek, "White Family Values in Ann Petry's *Country Place*"; Tim Engles, "African American Whiteness in Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills*"; Stephen P. Knadler, *The Fugitive Race: Minority Writers Resisting Whiteness*; Claudia Tate, "Hitting 'A Straight Lick with a Crooked Stick': *Seraph on the Suwanee*, Zora Neale Hurston's Whiteface Novel"; Veronica T. Watson, *The Souls of White Folk: African American Writers Theorize Whiteness*; and Matthew Wilson, *Whiteness in the Novels of Charles W. Chesnut*. For further analyses, see "Literature, Cinema and the Visual Arts" in *Towards a Bibliography of Critical Whiteness Studies*, edited by Tim Engles.

5. For further analysis of prosecutorial misconduct in terms of race, see Angela J. Davis, *Arbitrary Justice: The Power of the American Prosecutor* and "Racial Fairness in the Criminal Justice System: The Role of the Prosecutor."

6. In an essay that highlights the interplay of literacy and masculinity in Myers's memoir *Bad Boy* (2001), Don Latham provides further analysis of the echoes of Du Bois's concept in Myers's work in gendered terms (77–79). Masculinity itself is a central topic for Myers. In 1991, Bishop pointed out that Myers was "the only Black male currently and consistently publishing young adult novels" and asserted that his "brand of humor, his facile rendering of the rhetoric of Black teenage boys, his strong focus on fathers and sons, are all shaded by his experiences as a Black male" (*Presenting* 94). In 2007, Bishop noted that Myers was still "one of the few" African American men writing for teens, suggesting that "one of his major accomplishments . . . has been that he made visible and became the voice of urban Black teenage boys" (*Free* 206).

7. In support of the idea that Steve is constructed and performs as "acceptably black," and in light of the fact that Myers has been celebrated for the "flavor and authenticity" of his depiction of African American speech and the way "young men, especially, use their skill with words as a way to establish their masculinity and to establish their superiority over

those less skilled” (Bishop, *Presenting* 36), it is worth noting that Steve is presented—and presents himself—as writing and speaking a more whitened, “standard” English than do his coconspirators and fellow inmates.

8. For an argument against the possibility of genuine white empathy with nonwhite people, see Janine Jones, “The Impairment of Empathy in Goodwill Whites for African Americans.” For a study of brain activity in white research participants which suggests that white people lack empathy with nonwhite people, see Jennifer N. Gutsell and Michael Inzlicht, “Empathy Constrained: Prejudice Predicts Reduced Mental Simulation of Actions during Observation of Outgroups.”

9. For historical discussion regarding white conceptions of the supposed inability of people of African descent to feel a full range of human emotions, see George M. Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914*, 57–58. For analysis of ongoing manifestations of such conceptions, see the summary of psychological research suggesting “that emotions such as jealousy, sympathy, or hope are routinely denied to out-groups and preferentially attributed to in-group members” (293) in Phillip Atiba Goff, et al., “Not Yet Human: Implicit Knowledge, Historical Dehumanization, and Contemporary Consequences.”

10. By exposing common racialized tendencies among those who enact the operations of the criminal justice system, *Monster* echoes earlier books for children and young adults by African American writers that offer a very different historical overview of the even-handedness of American justice from that voiced by O’Brien. These include *South Town* (1958) and *North Town* (1965), by Lorenz Graham; *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou* (1968), by Kristin Hunter; *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976), by Mildred D. Taylor; and Walter Dean Myers’s first young adult novel, *Fast Sam, Cool Clyde and Stuff* (1975). About the latter, Bishop notes in *Presenting Walter Dean Myers* that “beneath the humor . . . Myers reminds readers of the often not-so-funny relationships between the police and the Afro-American community,” and that his work often makes “a statement about the tendency of non-Blacks to assume that groups of Black teenagers mean trouble” (20).

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