

“Canadian, Please”: The Intimate Space of YouTube Racism

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don't let those white supremacists get you down.
(viewer comment, “He’ll Never Be a Real Canadian,” YouTube, July 2015)

“Yeah I know that you wanna be Canadian, please.” This is the opening line of the 2009 “Canada Day” YouTube music video by Andrew Gunadie and Julia Bentley that went viral days after it was posted – to date having received over four million viewings.¹ The number of views alone, however, as Jean Burgess and Joshua Green point out, does not tell the full story of YouTube success (“Entrepreneurial” 100). The widespread popularity of the song and video is also evident in the fact that it has been subject to remixing and parody across the YouTube community and beyond. Burgess and Green, among others, highlight the “extensive ‘spreadability’” and intertextuality of YouTube videos as an index of their success (“Entrepreneurial” 100), but not only in the traditional forms of broadcast dissemination. The participatory and creative nature of YouTube consumption contributes to various forms of remediation that constitute the core of YouTube expression itself: from overt praise and/or condemnation in viewer comments or video responses, to parodies and “mashups” on other video sites, to repostings, remixes, and intertextual allusions. “Canadian, Please” has been subject to all of these, and more.

¹ As of 14 September 2015, the video has received over 4,363,000 viewings. There are a number of YouTube sites where one can view the video. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mWQf13B8epw>. Almost all of the videos I discuss here are posted on Gunadie’s YouTube page (under his YouTube name “gunnarolla”). Throughout this essay I will refer to Gunadie as the primary “author” of the video because it is his YouTube channel and video production, and comments directed at him personally, that form the focus of this essay.

Gunadie -- or “gunnarolla,” his YouTube name -- has acquired a reputation as an internet personality through a series of music videos, vlogs, video commentaries, travelogues, interviews, ironic instructional videos, and interactive creations. This mixture of musical performances with video blogging has contributed to Gunadie’s online visibility and success. His work is notable for its use of “the dialogic opportunities” of YouTube (“Entrepreneurial” 97), either by soliciting audience participation or by incorporating audience feedback into his video blogs. This occurs, for example, in Gunadie’s August 2008 “3 Misconceptions” video which he created in direct response to viewer misconceptions that he was Filipino.² Likewise, in a series of videos in which Gunadie appears with his mother, he asks his mother to read aloud posts he has received online; in one of these, Gunadie, wearing a baseball hat that reads “I Love Haters,” asks his mother why YouTube viewers post such unkind comments.³ This form of user collaboration is evident, as well, in his 2011 “22 Songs” challenge, in which he promised subscribers a sequence of 22 music videos within the space of five months, some of which were inspired by YouTube and Facebook comments, and provided updates on the progress of the videos in his video blogs.

“Canadian, Please,” with its various YouTube spin-offs, is no exception to this intertextual reflexivity. However, it stands as one of Gunadie’s best-known video creations for reasons that have less to do with the video itself than with the YouTube community who watched it. Indeed, while the backstory of the video’s creation is unremarkable, its afterlife constitutes an important lesson in online racism, Canadian nationalism, and affective (not to mention, effective) rebuttal. In 2009, Gunadie and Bentley, who had co-produced a number of other online music videos, wanted to produce a piece that would celebrate Canada in a way that incorporated a

² See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mW-bvsgSj3A> .

³ See, for example, “My Mom Reads Your Jokes” at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3DrwtNJ0XxI> and “My Mom Reads Meghan Tonjes’ Tweets” at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KY-tgS6X8QU> . The latter is the video in which Gunadie and his mother discuss hater comments.

playful irony about Canadian culture and national iconography. The video was not only popular among Gunadie’s YouTube subscribers, and among YouTube users more generally, but that December of 2009 Gunadie and Bentley were asked to perform the song live at the Olympic Torch Relay in Niagara Falls, and at additional public events thereafter. It has inspired numerous parodies and imitations by other performers as well, comparable to the “I AM Canadian” Molson’s beer advertisement of 2000, including a tongue-in-cheek “Canadian Dance Moves” video, which creates a series of iconic moves to the “Canadian, Please” soundtrack for when people want to “dance Canadian” (Lau).⁴

In content, the video is a kitsch anthem celebrating the supposed benefits of Canadian identity, using national iconography such as mounties, wilderness, insulin, medicare, and Céline Dion. As the song opens, Gunadie and Bentley, dressed as mounties against a backdrop of a Canadian river and forest (actually filmed near the Canoe Club in London, Ontario),⁵ review the many things that set Canada apart from other nations:

Yeah I know that you wanna be Canadian, please
Even if in winter things tend to freeze
We’ve got the world monopoly on trees
And our country’s bordered by three different seas
.....
Yeah I know that you wanna be Canadian, please
Where else do you find mounted police
Or go to the hospital and not pay fees
Yeah I know that you wanna be Canadian, please

⁴ See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j_-MsDSAW0Y for this humorous adaptation of the original “Canadian, Please” video. See also Jory Caron’s remake, with his own lyrics, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=59GwGfuiW3Q> and Hetalia’s remake at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UPcnADZzoGQ>. The original video has inspired numerous video remakes and parodies on YouTube, including a number of animated versions, highschool project remakes, and an “American, Please” parody (for the latter, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ckee0ioGD9c>).

⁵ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3a3u3UPKtGg> for the 29 June 2009 TV “A-news London” report on the making of the “Canadian, Please” video.

The mode of address in the song plays on a form of intimacy, addressed to a multiplicity of “you’s” – a format that Gunadie invokes throughout his oeuvre, which repeatedly makes use of the inherent self-reflexivity and interactive nature of YouTube as a medium. Gunadie is not unique in this, since this form of intimate address is built into YouTube’s structure, making of YouTube “an emotional experience” for both users and culture producers (Strangelove 4) and leading to “inter-creative participation” on both sides (Burgess and Green, *YouTube* 54). What is different in Gunadie’s case is that a series of implied communities – from the “you” in “YouTube” to the “you” in “Canadian, Please” to the “you” as a group of imagined Canadians – experienced a form of cross-over that led to some disturbing, and emotionally charged, results. In short, the fact that Gunadie is Asian Canadian, which does not receive particular comment among his regular YouTube followers, became the focus (and stumbling block) for many viewers who felt drawn by the nationalist text of “Canadian, Please.”

The “you” in “Canadian, Please” thus encapsulates different forms of address. On the one hand, the “you” reaches out to Gunadie’s YouTube subscribers, with whom he engages in ironic word-play (and, sometimes, parodic remakes), and to his regular YouTube followers more broadly. These fans, for the most part, liked the video and provided Gunadie with personal congratulations on his YouTube site. But the “you” in “Canadian, Please” cast a wider net beyond this immediate fan community because it invoked the terms of an imagined community of Canadians, thus attracting a highly particularized, if heterogeneous, community of respondents. To adapt Lauren Berlant’s terms, the video was pitched at the “intimate public” of Canadian nationalists, those who *feel* connected by a shared commonality (5) – in this case, a shared sense of identifying with a concept of “Canadianness.” Theorists have analyzed the ways video tagging can attract larger audiences on YouTube (often through the use of sexual tags or

images); in this case, the “Canadian” tag drew in a demographic that had not previously been aware of Gunadie’s work. The “you” in the address might thus be posited as a symbolic stand-in for this imagined community as a whole, a community that might be thought to identify, in some way, with the larger category “Canadian.” What Gunadie’s video inadvertently accomplished, however, was to expose the cracks in this imaginary construct. As Berlant observes in her analysis of the intimate public of femininity, this public is embedded by “a white universalist paternalism” and bourgeois ethic that is defined by the rhetoric of compassionate liberalism or “soft supremacy” (6). This is comparable to the analysis of “white civility” that Daniel Coleman identifies in the founding of the Canadian nation-state, or the Canadian “myth of tolerance” identified by Eva Mackey (xvi). In the case of “Canadian, Please,” the video invoked a notion of Canadian inclusivity that did not mesh with the version of multiculturalism assumed by many viewers, one based in notions of white, bourgeois legitimation and, indeed, in what Coleman describes as a “limited or constrained universality” (13). YouTube viewers celebrated the song in the video, but they stumbled on the optics of an Asian Canadian performing it. As one respondent to the video stated of Gunadie: “He might be a Canadian citizen, but he’ll never be a real Canadian.” The participatory nature of YouTube engagement thus revealed the exclusionary, indeed highly *non-participatory*, underside of Canadian nationalism, and multiculturalism, in fairly stark, unedited ways. In this essay, I wish to explore the ways this exposure came about, and to consider Gunadie’s highly creative and interactive responses to the troubling and almost overwhelming challenges to his right to call himself “Canadian.”

Ostensibly, “Canadian, Please” posits a speaker who is addressing non-Canadians who seek to become Canadian – a “you” who, in the implied imaginary scenario behind the video, has

expressed a desire to be Canadian: “Yeah I know that you wanna be Canadian, please.”⁶ Implicitly, however, the evocations of “familiar” Canadian iconography and references in the video appeal to Canadian viewers, many of whom like to think (and yet feel vaguely embarrassed about thinking) that their national identity is desirable elsewhere.⁷ Hence the references to the discovery of insulin and the invention of the zipper might not signify for non-Canadian viewers in the same way as they would for people who were educated in Canada or who saw their children educated in Canada (indeed, these kinds of nationalist Canadian “fun facts” are widely disseminated among Canadian school-age children in the elementary grades).⁸ In this way, the “you” in the video was also directed at viewers who already identified as Canadian.

One could also argue that Gunadie and Bentley are playing on the rhetoric of “happiness” – and, indeed, civility – that is often promoted in popular discourses of nationhood. The “please” in the title signals this at the outset, making fun of the Canadian propensity for “politeness” while also positioning the subject who desires to become Canadian in a subordinate position: *I want to become Canadian, please*. As Sara Ahmed puts it, “the ‘happiness’ promised by the nation is what sustains investment in the nation in the absence of return, a ‘happiness’ that is always deferred as the promise of reward for good citizenship” (196). And this promise, as we know, is premised upon a hierarchy, since it depends upon an “outsider” who longs to be let in. “Canadian, Please” foregrounds this “promise” in a tongue-in-cheek way, inviting the viewer not simply to experience Canada, but, in a sense, to become a good Canadian citizen (to “be”

⁶ Ironically, this same “you” might be applied to Gunadie himself following the hostile postings to the video, since his desire to claim identity as a Canadian, which he assumed was a given, was challenged by viewers who applied their own prescriptive sense of what qualified as Canadian identity.

⁷ See Sugars, “Marketing Ambivalence,” for the ways this ambivalence about national identity was consciously marketed by Molson’s for their famous beer advertisements in the early 2000s.

⁸ In my own children’s school, for example, students must participate in an annual event entitled “*La Foire du Patrimoine*,” in which students produce individual projects devoted to Canadian inventions, celebrities, or historical events, which are then put on display at a local “fair.” The discovery of insulin is always a popular topic.

Canadian) – as though the essence of something “Canadian” were easily transferrable if one followed four simple instructions. As the lyrics of the song state:

So you’re thinking to yourself,
“How do I live in this beautiful country?”
Well we’ve got some steps for you to follow. . .
STEP 1: Lose the gun
STEP 2: Buy a canoe
STEP 3: Live multiculturally
STEP 4: You’re ready, there is no more!

In this sense, the video inverted the implied exclusionist positing of nationalist discourse while still maintaining it: it invited outsiders in, yet on the assumption, of course, that these outsiders desired to become converts, transformed into model Canadian citizens.

What Gunadie and Bentley did not anticipate, however, was the wave of intense racist feedback that followed, particularly the ways it was framed *within* a celebratory Canadian nationalism. The imagined community, in other words, was revealed to be imploding from within. The YouTube site soon became flooded (almost to the point of obsession) with remarks aimed at Gunadie’s Asian descent and his questionable right to claim to “be” Canadian, thus making him, indirectly, one to whom the song itself was *not* directed. It was therefore not the existence of “hater” comments that most upset the video’s producers – indeed, these are a given for most YouTube postings. What came as a surprise was the extent to which the “haters” spoke from within the intimate public of Canadian nationalism. The target community for the video emerged as its most vociferous attackers, even as they positioned themselves as agreeing with the video’s nationalist logic.

The video did not aspire to this controversial positioning, of course. In an academic context, current work by such scholars as Christine Kim, Diana Brydon, Marta Dvorak, and others have explored the formation of racialised publics in response to colonialist practices that

prescribe or contain public imagining. Gunadie's video was thrust, inadvertently, into the midst of these debates despite (or indeed because of) its assumption of the inherent flexibility of Canadian identity. Exclusion on the basis of race, the video assumes from the outset, is not an issue. In a sense, this positions Gunadie as undertaking a reworking of the national public from within, which Berlant identifies in cases when writers are "writing from *within* a sphere of address and demanding a revision of its terms of recognition"; in other words, "they [are] writing as critical members of an intimate public to demand its reorganization" (6; italics in the original). While Bentley and Gunadie may have assumed that this reorganization had already taken place, what emerged was a clash of notions of the Canadian intimate public. The viewer attacks focussed on Gunadie's presumption to claim to be Canadian, which in turn questioned his right to engage in Canadian nationalist discourse. *Go back to your country*, he was told. *Get off YouTube*. YouTube became a synecdoche for the national space as a whole, and Gunadie's legitimacy in inhabiting it was called into question. The participatory and collaborative YouTube community thus became the source of exclusion, barring someone's right to *be* a member of the YouTube community in the same way that Gunadie's membership as "Canadian" was being questioned.

In short, Gunadie's attempt to reach beyond his immediate YouTube following to a wider public of Canadian nationalists was foiled by the very contradictions embedded within the national community itself, revealing that this community was indeed an imaginary one. The negative responses to Gunadie's contribution to Canadian cultural nationalism thrust him and the video into the spotlight of racialised public discourse theory, with the responses not only undercutting the very idea of Canada that the video applauded, but also the fantasied Canada that the haters themselves professed to be defending. The comments revealed that Canadians, and

concepts of holistic “Canadianness,” were exclusionary and bigoted, thus confirming Eva Mackey’s analysis of the Canadian “myth of national tolerance” (24) as precisely that: a myth.

The backlash against the video was so extreme and unsettling that it led to a CBC news investigation, hosted by Mark Kelley in his “Online Uncovered” series in May 2010, in which Gunadie described the racism the video had triggered and his inspired YouTube fight against the racists.⁹ In the report, Gunadie, interviewed by Jen Hollett for the CBC, summarized the disturbingly racist responses that the video had induced among online viewers.¹⁰ As Gunadie told Hollett, “It got to a point where on ‘Canadian, Please’ I was getting comments daily pointing out the fact that ‘there’s an Asian guy in a Canadian video,’ ‘He’s Asian, why is there an Asian?’ and I saw that as an opportunity to do something creative with it and say, ‘Well, you know what, I *am* Asian.’” What the racist commenters rejected was not the video’s claim that one of the main steps in “being Canadian” is to “live multiculturally,” but rather that a “multicultural” Canadian could claim to speak for Canadians and, more precisely, to pronounce on what constituted Canadian identity. Gunadie’s Asian appearance was deemed, by many viewers, to strip him of any authority *as a Canadian*.

Of course, Gunadie’s Asian-Canadian heritage is arguably a *crucial* element of the film in relaying its multicultural lesson, for the video enacts, through his visible participation, the very message that it preaches: that being Canadian is open to people of all ethnic and racial backgrounds. One could argue that he embodies the Canadian ideal that the song celebrates. Indeed, while pitched at an imagined non-Canadian viewer or listener, the video does not assume that “Canadians” are necessarily white (though of course the racist comments made the

⁹ For the news report, see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sr2Sogn28_4.

¹⁰ The comments are too offensive to bear repeating, though Gunadie does cite a few in the CBC program and in many of his subsequent anti-racist videos (some of which I discuss in this essay). Suffice it to say that the slurs focused almost exclusively on Gunadie’s Asian appearance/ancestry.

assumption that Canadian *nationalists* should be). Interestingly, the racist viewers did not argue with the video's euphoric and emblematic nationalism or with the multicultural message of the song, but rather with Gunadie's presumption in legitimating himself to make such a statement. It was neither the medium nor the message, but rather the *messenger* that provoked their adamant defence of Canadianness. One viewer comment expressed this quite bluntly: "multicultural doesn't mean the same thing as multiracial."¹¹ In other words, viewers did not question the concept of Canadian community – on the contrary, they saw themselves to be defending and indeed embodying the concept – even as they were themselves engaged in erupting it. Gunadie, of course, saw the irony in the contradiction. "There were a ton of 'go back to your own country' comments," he told Sylvia Tran in a 2012 interview for the Asian Canadian journal *ricepaper*, "which is hilarious, since I was born in Canada."

Fed up with being subjected to online abuse, Gunadie took matters into his own hands by self-reflexively using YouTube's participatory forum. Strangelove identifies a substantial tradition of YouTube artists who use the medium of YouTube to take measures against hater responses (118). Gunadie, therefore, is not alone in this. While Burgess and Green, citing Patricia Lange, note the ways video blogging works by putting "intimate moments" in public view (*YouTube* 80), so, too, do user comments assume a form of intimacy in their direct address to the YouTube producer and, indeed, to one another. In this way, "the interpersonal and intimate identity work of everyday life," Burgess and Green argue, can be converted into "'public' debates around social identities" (80). While the public debates sparked in response to Gunadie's video were anything but inclusive, the intimacy of the hater responses did indeed expose the fictionality of Canada's much touted myth of inclusivity.

¹¹ This comment was posted in 2012 in response to Gunadie's video "Yo you Chinese F***Go Back to Your Country."

Gunadie’s video retaliations, however, took a particular form in the ways he not only publicized and exposed his haters’ racism, but also in the way he played on YouTube’s interactivity by actively re-enacting his emotional response to the haters. The affective nature of the intimate public, in other words, became a tool which Gunadie mobilized for his comeback, thus demonstrating what Ahmed describes as “the very public nature of emotions, and the emotive nature of publics” (14). If intimate publics flourish as “affective scene[s] of identification” (Berlant viii), in which subjects achieve a sense of consolation and confirmation, Gunadie turned this intimacy on its head by performing his own subverted sense of commonality through a public display of intimate emotional distress. He did this by performing himself as a video blogger on the receiving end of racist hater messages. Gunadie’s insight was to make use of the public/private overlay that is inherent in YouTube’s interactive forum, and to play on different modes of address – both the intimate and public “you” – through a form of emotional re-enactment. In the process, he made the latent racism at the heart of Canadian nationalist discourse uncomfortably visible. By producing a series of YouTube videos that offered a nuanced critique of racialised power politics, first by citing and displaying the hate-mongering YouTube comments he had received, and second, by responding through a public re-enactment of his own “uncomfortable” emotional response, Gunadie proved the power of social media (and, indeed, possibly of a reconstituted nationalist discourse) to re-ignite debates about cultural politics and racism.

Tackling the racism head-on, Gunadie’s retaliatory videos lampooned – and, indeed, trumped – the racists by parodying the very slurs they had applied against him and “performing” his emotional distress. Speaking to Hollett for the CBC, Gunadie commented on the approach he

took in his October 2009 video “He’ll Never Be a Real Canadian,”¹² the first of numerous anti-racist video responses that he would produce over the next several years: “I believe the best way to deal with ignorance, with racism, is through education, and the best way to educate people is to entertain them.” Hollett describes Gunadie’s parodic method as one in which he “decided to embrace some Asian stereotypes and strike back.” However, the genius of “He’ll Never Be a Real Canadian” goes far beyond this. In fact, in the video Gunadie parodically *rejects* (rather than embraces) these stereotypes. As it opens, we watch him realizing, with mock horror, that he is of Asian descent. Comparable to “Canadian, Please,” “He’ll Never Be a Real Canadian” invokes numerous icons of Asianness (rice noodles, chopsticks, green tea) in a hilarious send-up, as it portrays Gunadie, playing himself, reading the online comments about “Canadian, Please” and suddenly having a “eureka” epiphany: “I’m Asian????” The video then follows a distressed and anxious Gunadie as he finds more and more evidence in his home that proves his Asian identity (from “made in China” objects, to paper fans, to Chinese take-out menus). Gunadie thus spoofed the commentators’ obsessive fixation on racial identity by parodically performing a painful recognition of his racial and ethnic difference.

“He’ll Never Be a Real Canadian,” the title of which is taken from an actual hater comment that Gunadie received, concludes with an intertextual reference to “Canadian, Please.” The last frame of the video reads: “Step 3: live multiculturally.” Responding to the taunts in an explicitly emotionalized way (shock, grief, shame, fear, disarray), Gunadie did not resolve the intimate and uncomfortable moments to which he had been subjected on YouTube. On the contrary, the discomfort of online racism prompted from him a self-consciously “uncomfortable” affective response – ultimately a parodic one, to be sure, but nevertheless one grounded in an original sensation of distress, as Gunadie admits in his CBC interview. Indeed, the end of the

¹² See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CCXqOFjsiZs>.

video shows Gunadie trying to find solace in the fact that “it was all a dream.” As he says to his roommate in the video: “I just had this weird, racist dream that I forgot I was Asian and that people had to remind me in the YouTube comments.” In this way Gunadie mocks the racist respondents – as if to say to the racists, *now tell me something I don’t know* – while underscoring the painful reality of online (and Canadian) racism. As his roommate ominously concludes, “Actually, that was not dream.” The effect of “He’ll Never Be a Real Canadian,” then, was especially powerful because of its affective disruption from within the intimate community of Canadian nationalism.

A similar effect is achieved in Gunadie’s powerful 2011 music video “Sense No Make English.”¹³ Here he puts the hater comments he received to music, with himself singing the comments as lyrics while displaying them on screen.¹⁴ Visually, the video is sedate, with a frontal close-up of Gunadie’s face against a diffused white background, singing the words directly to the camera. From the outset, the lyrics and melody suggest a love song:

I was stupid,
thinking we both understood,
that the rules that we set
couldn’t be broken.
Now I know that
you show so little respect
for the things that matter to me the most.

In this case, the “rules that we set” might apply to the social contract integral to YouTube’s participatory and collaborative structure, but also to the implicit rules of the intimate public of

¹³ There are two versions of this video, an abridged and an extended version. The extended version requires a subscription to Gunadie’s YouTube channel; the abridged version is available for free online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ABgf3-X1gvk>.

¹⁴ A similar pair of videos shows Gunadie taking hater comments and setting them to music. One of these is the song itself, “The Hater Comment Song,” with lyrics that are taken directly from racist comments he has received online and which are then ridiculed simply by being set in the context of a song (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CULX7rFC2C8>); the second, “How to Play a Hater Comment (Piano Tutorial),” is staged as a piano lesson, conducted by Gunadie, in which he instructs viewers in how to create an original musical composition made up of hater comments (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rDjbohGdyCM>).

Canadian nationalism, which promises inclusivity and mutual respect to its members. Racist comments that were posted in response to “Canadian, Please” – for example, “wtf is some chinky looking kno wearing the mouny uniform for?” – appear in this video pasted over Gunadie’s mouth, as if to enact a visual silencing or censoring. If these comments are seen to “speak for” the silenced victim, literally by putting words in his mouth, Gunadie’s calm demeanour as he sings the words counters their offensive content. As the video continues, Gunadie, still adopting the tone of an emotive love song, ironically undercuts the hater comments by highlighting their spelling and grammatical errors. The racist comments are made to appear nonsensical and illiterate in contrast to the articulate and measured response of the racialised singer. The comments are thus held up for ridicule, even while the muted quality of the music and lyrics suggests the intimate violence such comments enact. By re-voicing the hater comments in his song/video, the silencing of the victim that might follow racist slurs is overturned, and Gunadie uses an affective address to underscore the problematic underside of nation-based intimacy, which assumes that white Canadians are the authentic measure of a “multicultural” Canadian identity. Again, the video shows Gunadie tapping into multiple affective registers – pain, irony, anger, humour, sincerity, candour – in order to display the gamut of affective responses racist abuse elicits, particularly when it emerges in the context of claims to national identity and belonging. By thus performing an affective and intimate response in the context of the “Canadian, Please” aftermath, Gunadie speaks from within the space of Canadian nationalist discourse as a way of disrupting its apparent embrace of difference and its façade of white liberal civility.

Another anti-racist video response that makes use of the self-referential YouTube forum is Gunadie’s 2009 “Yo you Chinese f*** go back to ur country” in which Gunadie stages a

fictional enactment of himself having a text/post exchange with one of his “haters.”¹⁵ A young white man is shown viewing one of Gunadie’s YouTube videos, and we watch as he posts a racist comment to the YouTube site: “yo you chinsesse f*** go back to ur country.” The screen then switches to Gunadie in front of his computer, watching as the comment arrives. What follows is a back-and-forth exchange as Gunadie and his “hater” exchange text comments (supplemented by a “voice-over” of their inner thoughts), with Gunadie correcting the man’s spelling of “chinsesse,” and the young man, at a loss for further insults, finally typing (and misspelling) in a moment of rash hatred: “your gay.” Superimposed as a text comment atop the final frame, Gunadie has added the comment: “In retrospect, ‘chinsesse’ was probably a typo rather than a spelling error . . . but that doesn’t make it okay.” The sincerity of Gunadie’s final tag is an effective comment on the irony of the video itself, which shows the white man guffawing at the cleverness of his racist comebacks. Yet this final comment pulls the viewer back into the world of Gunadie’s affective response: it is not “okay” because it hurts someone. In this way, Gunadie is able to make use of the participatory culture inherent to YouTube to engage public discourse about Canadian nationalism, speaking as a member of that intimate public to highlight the pervasive invisibility of Canadian racism. People may excuse it or not see it, he says, but that “doesn’t make it okay.”

Strangelove has explored the interactive structure of YouTube and the ways YouTubers have developed a distinct genre of intertextual reflexivity. As Strangelove describes it, “YouTube creates its own self-referential, reflexive culture” (116), which not only highlights the workings of the medium of YouTube itself, but which also references other YouTube videos (many of which might themselves draw on different followers). In this way, YouTube not only generates new media genres, but it also generates “new fan communities that are indigenous to

¹⁵ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W9NxT8Smfts>.

YouTube” (116), communities that demonstrate a “high level of interpretative skills” (117). Not surprisingly, then, the comments posted in response to gunnarolla’s YouTube videos pick up on the self-reflexivity of his work, alluding to his anti-racist commentaries more broadly. In the case of the “chinese” video, one comment even highlights the absurdity of the texts shown in the video – “This shows how racism is stupid as fuck” – by underscoring the hater’s stupidity in tagging the word “fuck” to each racist slur.

Gunadie’s post-“Canadian, Please” videos caught the attention of millions of viewers, drawing on a number of overlapping YouTube communities who identified with the intimate sphere of anti-racism and Canadian nationalism that Gunadie’s work was articulating. Refusing to be interpellated by a racist discourse of national exclusivity, or for that matter by the widespread violence of online bullying, Gunadie “outed” himself as an object of public (yet anonymous) abuse from within the intimate public of Canadian nationalism. Responses applauded his attempt to open up the discourse of Canadian nationalism to debates about racism and implicit notions of “old-stock Canadian” authority,¹⁶ what Mackey refers to as “‘*Canadian-Canadian*’ identity” (20). YouTube watchers did not miss the power and humour of Gunadie’s video comebacks, and they responded by invoking the discourse of (national) intimacy which his work invited – both through the “you” address of “Canadian, Please” and through his affective performances as a racialized subject. Mobilizing a concept of “collective sociality routed in revelations of what is personal” (Berlant 10), comments posted in response to “He’ll Never Be a Real Canadian” drew on identificatory terminology through which viewers attempted to unite

¹⁶ I am invoking here a recent comment by the then Canadian Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, in which, with reference to the Syrian refugee crisis during the 2015 Canadian election campaign, he distinguished between “old-stock Canadians” and new Canadians. See http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2015/09/17/old-stock-canadians-harper-debate-economy_n_8156190.html.

with Gunadie personally, not on the level of racial identification, but on the level of anti-racist Canadian nationalism. Indeed, “Canadian, Please” and “He’ll Never Be a Real Canadian” elicited a public forum of discussion that included viewers from a variety of ethnic, racial, age, and gender categories, enacting the perception of unity that Berlant highlights as central in the construction of intimate publics:

Just subscribed to your channel, for the Canadian Please reference in Macleans, then watched this video and howled. Thx. 50 year old white mom who can’t believe people say those things anymore, in Canada yet!

My ancestors emigrated from Europe. Yours emigrated from Asia. We’re all Canadian.

I’m a Fijian Muslim who is 100% Canadian, my husband is Canadian born Chinese and we have a daughter who's the best of both worlds. If that’s not Canadian I have no idea what is! And I’m super proud that I’m a Canadian and I’m super proud that you made this video

Touche! I’m very happy to see that you’re able to respond to idiots with humour and grace. Being a white Canadian of purely Scottish and English background, I can’t relate to how it must feel to be belittled for my ancestry, but I sure appreciate a cool response. Way to go!

As an indigenous person whose people have lived on the North American continent since the beginning of time when we descended from the Stars, it is within my power to confer upon you, Indigenous status. You are now an honorary member of the Huichol Nation. (That should really p*ss off the haters.)¹⁷

The personalized nature of the YouTube postings is typical of the functioning of intimate publics as outlined by Berlant; however, Gunadie had accomplished something else as well. Not only did he use his YouTube profile to extend the discourse of Canadian nationalism into an overt discussion of its invisible racist underlay, but he also used his YouTube channel to create a series of distinctive intertextual works that made use of the “social interaction taking place online” (Strangelove 9) to highlight the power of YouTube as a powerful anti-racist medium. Gunadie had thus opened up the intimate sphere of nationalism to reconfiguration. In the process,

¹⁷ All of these comments were posted on the YouTube site in response to Gunadie’s “He’ll Never Be a Real Canadian.”

he was able to undertake the kind of intervention described by Erin Wunker, in which “what changes is not simply the structure of intimacy, but also the public space itself. In other words, the motion between outside and inside becomes a dynamic working of the self into the world” (98). Through his video responses, Gunadie inserted himself, and Asian Canadians, into the generative sphere of nationalist activism, more so than he had through “Canadian, Please.” In effect, the videos enacted a revision of the intimate public of nationalism: not a public “for racialized participants” (27), to quote Christine Kim, but a public constituted around an anti-racist nationalism. One commentator even went so far as to mimic the opening parody of unwelcome racial self-awareness in “He’ll Never Be a Real Canadian” by voicing the unmarked (white) foundation of Canadian identity: “Oh shit! I just realized.... Im a white chick!!!!!!”

Gunadie’s work thus leads us to consider the anti-racist potential – and power – of even an overtly *nationalist* text such as “Canadian, Please” and its sequels. Ironically, his videos inspired a more powerful anti-racist message, and reached a far wider audience, than many other supposedly more polished or educative attempts to address ongoing racism in Canada. Gunadie is not naïve about the power of art to change the world, but he does consider his work to be an important intervention in the fight against YouTube racism. “I’m not going to solve the problem of racism on YouTube, and I don’t know if I’m necessarily going to change a lot of people’s minds,” he told Hollett. “If you have racist thoughts, if you have something inside you that doesn’t like other ethnicities, I can’t do anything about that. I hope that I’m entertaining people. I hope that other non-white kids out there . . . if they take something away from the video, it’s that ‘You can be Canadian too. Anyone can be Canadian.’”

Through his multi-generic YouTube productions, Gunadie connected with a broad-based, transnational audience and elicited waves of support. While his YouTube videos cover many

topics, it is fair to say that his anti-racist videos have garnered more positively enthusiastic comments than the original “Canadian, Please.” The hater comments, in other words, were responsible for Gunadie’s creation and dissemination of far more persuasive anti-racist works. As one comment in response to “He’ll Never Be a Real Canadian” stated: “thank god we have somebody who can take hate and make it into a hilarious video! this has to be one of my fav videos. thank you haters for giving gunnarolla another video idea!”

Gunadie’s anti-racist videos take a variety of forms in addition to the ones I have discussed, including his online conversations with his mother, his tongue-in-cheek monologues on the “perfect banana,” his “Can-Asian Style” fashion tips, and his commentaries on Canadian icons and politics (from depictions of Asian-Canadians on Canadian currency to his spoof on Toronto mayor Rob Ford).¹⁸ Gunadie’s videos stand as a powerful testament to the mediating force of digital technologies and online exchanges as a forum in which debates about nationality, racism, and citizenship are being waged. If Smaro Kamboureli has critiqued Canadian multicultural policy for its attempts to “discipline diversity,” Gunadie’s intervention is exemplary of her call to perform a “mastery of discomfort” (130), by which she means an approach that does not resolve uncomfortable moments into invisibility. In this instance, we might say, the discomfort of online racism prompted a self-consciously “uncomfortable” response from Gunadie (in “He’ll Never Be a Real Canadian” and “Sense No Make English”), which in turn rendered the intimacy of discomfort (and, indeed, the intimate effects of racism) publically visible. As Gunadie put it in an interview with *ricepaper*: “I’d love if my videos could broaden people’s horizons a bit. . . . There were some great responses to “He’ll Never Be a Real

¹⁸ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bBv2ddh2twc> for Gunadie’s “The Perfect Banana” and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gaVgFVK5VUQ> for “Protect Your Banana”; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KPxRI3MDtdg> for his “Rice-ist” video; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PpFLbc49xS0> for Gunadie’s comments on the Canadian \$100 bill; and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0-5BEW3dhZc> for one of his “Can-Asian Style” videos.

Canadian” – getting people thinking about and talking about what makes a ‘real’ Canadian.” Gunadie’s self-reflexive and anti-racist videos testify not only to the power of YouTube’s participatory structure in providing agency from within, but also to ways the intimate public of Canadian nationalism might be mobilized to re-ignite social and cultural critique.

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