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From Awareness to Action:
Young Adult Literature as a Road to Reflection and Catalyst for Change

The words an author sets down on the page fail to stay flat and orderly, in straight and tidy lines, once they meet with a reader. Instead, they are transmuted and transformed in the transaction between writer and reader. The curves and lines change somehow in the shift to phrases and sentences and again to images with meaning as they weave and whirl into the mind, home to the lived experiences of the reader. These lived experiences, in their vast variation, further influence and shape the words, creating myriad meanings and shades of difference resulting from diverse lives, perspectives, and realities. From the text to the self to the world, words gather depth and range and power. Those who read them, by extension, see themselves—and see themselves differently.

As educators, we believe we might harness this literary energy by encouraging students to pay explicit attention to the interplay between a text, their own lives, and the larger communities they inhabit. By asking young people to consider (and question) their assumptions about others and themselves as they read, we might guide them in gaining both a critical perspective of the society in which they live as well as a commitment to action in the attempt to improve it.

These efforts are in line with several studies that draw upon literature, particularly young adult literature, to foster consideration of social justice issues among students (Alsup, 2003; Eppert, Etheridge, & Bach, 2007; Glasgow, 2001; Stover & Bach, 2012). In this article, we build upon this literature to examine the potential of a critical literacy approach grounded in conversation for the teaching of four young adult (YA) novels, *Tree Girl* (Mikaelson, 2004), *Sold* (McCormick, 2006), *If You Come Softly* (Woodson, 1998), and *Raining Sardines* (Flores-Galbis, 2007). We examine particularly the ways in which educators might use these titles to foster awareness of social injustice and a resulting obligation and dedication to social change.

Theoretical Grounding

Identity is negotiable and socially constructed (Gee, 1999). Individuals, through their dress, behaviors, institutional and social affiliations, etc., signal meaning that helps others identify them as a particular kind of person. In this sense, identity reflects a broad set of domains co-constructed in moment-to-moment interaction over local time and over a broader socio-historical context (Nasir & Sax, 2003). Yet, it is discourse, language interaction, that indicates how an individual perceives and is perceived (Fishman, 1989; Gumperz, 1982). Thus, identity formation occurs when individuals come to understand themselves dialogically, through specific conversations, in specific groups.

These conversations are essential if we hope to prepare young people to enter the larger communities and worlds they inhabit. "Critical literacy" is the hallmark of the effective democratic citizen. It is characterized by an intensely engaging, interrogating, and curious approach to the social, political, cultural, linguistic, and economic conditions that we encounter

every day. Classroom teaching strategies and materials grounded in critical literacy aim to disrupt the commonplace, interrogate multiple viewpoints, focus on sociopolitical issues, take action, and promote social justice (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002), thus encouraging students to develop independent, divergent ways of thinking and living that prepare them for visible and sustained participation in a democratic society. Given the honest and complex ways in which many YA authors navigate socioeconomic, racial, and sexual/gendered territories, the texts they craft provide ideal means to encourage critical and careful examination of the self and society on and off the page.

Ideally, as students develop increased awareness of the self and the other in the process of textual analysis, they develop identities . . . that reflect a commitment to social justice by experiencing a shift from awareness to action.

Moving into Practice

Literacy is empowering only if one is a critical reader—one who analyzes, questions, and evaluates that which is being read (Cadiero-Kaplan, 2002; Christensen, 2000; Freire & Macedo, 1987). Critical readers become empowered through their ability to question the dominant culture as means to better understand how to transform it (Apple, 2001). They recognize that they, as readers and members of a particular social context, have permission to question, and even reject, constructions of reality that do not match their own.

To enrich such study and foster a critical stance, teachers might also ask students to consider the sociocultural identities of these characters and how they fit (or do not fit) into the worlds described on the page—as well as those inhabited by the students who read about them. Ideally, as students develop increased awareness of the self and the other in the process of textual analysis, they develop identities that extend beyond the words on the page and into the world at large, identities that reflect a commitment to social justice by experiencing a shift from awareness to action.

Tree Girl and *Sold*: Gaining Awareness through Revelation and Critique

In the examination of literature, teachers often encourage a close study of characters and their motivations. As a means to enrich such study and foster a critical stance, teachers might also ask students to consider the sociocultural identities of these characters and how they fit (or do not fit) into the worlds described on the page—as well as those inhabited by the students who read about them. Such opportunities encourage the (re)consideration of assumptions and biases sometimes inherent in both literature and life.

Mikaelson's young adult novel, *Tree Girl* (2004), presents a nonfiction account of Gabriela, a Mayan Indian who lives during the Guatemalan civil war. Escaping the destruction of her family and village by climbing trees, Gabriela witnesses the rape, torture, and massacre of her people. Given the political and social dynamics of the history behind the story, the novel allows for rich discussion of the outside influences that may shape and form identity. Furthermore, the text gives students a window into the harsh realities and injustices of the world, ideally allowing for critique of the United States' involvement in the affair and formation of a stance toward social justice and equality.

Sold (McCormick, 2006) offers similar opportunities. The novel chronicles the terrifying truths of child prostitution in India and Nepal. Using first-person, innocent-eye narration, McCormick develops Lakshmi's character and story through lyrical prose and free verse form. As Lakshmi archives the painful realization that she has been sold to a brothel in the impoverished city of Calcutta, India, by her menacing stepfather, readers are given an honest recitation of the implications of a young girl's naïveté compounded with her gender and cultural roles.

Teachers might use both texts to examine character as a form of critique and revelation. They may wish, for example, to have students assume the role of Gabriela or Lakshmi and consider the following questions:

- Who am I?
- With which groups do I identify?
- With which groups do I have trouble identifying? Why might this be?
- How might I chart the relationships of power in my community?

- Which groups in my community are marginalized? Why might this be?
- Is it my responsibility to change this? Why or why not? If so, how might I change this?

These fundamental questions give students a sense of Gabriela and Lakshmi as human beings and not just characters on a page. In the process of responding through the eyes of these young women, students might come to better understand and analyze these fictional situations, thus fostering a sense of empathy that might extend into their own nonfiction lives.

Similarly, *Tree Girl* and *Sold* might both be used to encourage students to make text-to-self connections that allow them to critically negotiate the similarities and differences inherent in the text and the lives of readers to generate an understanding of how fiction might inform life. To promote such sociocultural connections, students might contemplate the following questions:

- What is the purpose for this text?
- Why did the author compose this piece?
- Whose view(s) does this text represent? Are other views silenced or unrepresented?
- In what format is this text constructed? How does the format influence the reader? Impact the text?
- Is the text meaningful? How is meaning constructed?
- In what way does the text offer readers an opportunity to take a stance on a particular issue?
- How has the text helped to clarify or shape *my own* beliefs and/or attitudes?
- How does the power of language appeal to my emotions? How might I use language to expose a concern?
- In what way(s) can my awareness of global concern influence global change?

Because these novels have the power to elicit both a compelling and foreign emotional response from readers, it is essential that students have an opportunity to "debrief," so to speak, and thoughtfully process the disquieting yet inspiring content. Pushing students to a level of discomfort in their thinking, requiring them to empathize with characters so far removed from their sometimes sheltered worlds, and then asking them to apply those new feelings acquired through empathy to enact social changes pose a certain challenge, one that requires educators to be willing to face discomfort in their students and themselves.

Yet, it is through raw accounts like those portrayed in *Tree Girl* and *Sold* that students are able to shine a light on various lifestyles, cultures, and even social problems that would be otherwise left dark and unknown. Through this exposure, students' awareness grows, and their problem-solving skills are enhanced as educators encourage them to "make sense" of what they have read. While students may struggle to relate directly to Gabriela's or Lakshmi's character, unique lifestyle, and unfathomable circumstances, students will find recognition in the shared emotions of fear, despair, inadequacy—and, eventually, hope. From here, a universal skill is born; students can harness these feelings to fuel their understanding of specific problems and initiate action to help solve them.

If You Come Softly **and** ***Raining Sardines*****: Taking Action through the Reclamation of Voice**

Students possess a power they might not even realize they command; they have the opportunity to speak, to give voice to their views. Considering the ways in which we negotiate our identities through dialogue and written discourse, it is crucial that we empower our students with the knowledge that their voices matter in their own lives and the larger communities in which they live. It is certainly important to use the texts we read in our classrooms to improve the reading and writing skills of our students; however, if we help students develop strong academic skills and they cannot or do not apply these skills in an effort to improve the world around them, our progress is negligible.

As Bomer (2007) suggests, "civic literacy . . . is especially suited to schools, because the public school system exists to create publics—to make of every student a citizen" (p. 303). Because democracy depends upon active citizens who speak out for change, we cannot afford to model complacency to our students; we owe it to our young people to equip them with the confidence, skills, and practice necessary for them to find, value, and utilize their voices for action.

Students can use critical literacy to move beyond simple awareness of the presence of social, cultural, racial, and gender-based injustices and transform their thoughts into catalysts of change. Language constitutes "one of the most powerful media for transmitting

our personal histories and social realities, as well as for thinking and shaping the world" (Darder, 1991, p. 101). As controllers of their personal and social realities, it is important for students themselves to take an active position as a force behind such changes.

Students can use critical literacy to move beyond simple awareness of the presence of social, cultural, racial, and gender-based injustices and transform their thoughts into catalysts of change.

Woodson's *If You Come Softly* (1998) forces readers to confront uncomfortable issues regarding race and class as they follow the journey of two 15-year-old New Yorkers—one black, one white—who have fallen for each other and find the world has difficulty accepting their love. The teens struggle with the reactions of their friends, family, and community. Woodson switches perspectives between the two characters with each chapter, so readers see how the community's reactions—both the hurtful words and the emptiness of invalidation—affect them both. Readers also bear witness as both teens struggle to find and raise their voices in support of their relationship and in opposition to the discrimination and judgment they face.

The study of *If You Come Softly* might include student consideration of how Miah and Ellie are silenced, sometimes willingly, and how both the characters, and readers themselves, might raise their voices to elicit social change. To that end, teachers might pose questions that encourage reflection, then action, helping students to identify the real-world implications of the issues raised in this fictional account:

- Reflection: What position(s) of power does Miah hold? How might Ellie be more privileged than Miah? How do these characters seem to feel about their economic, racial, and social privilege (or lack thereof)?
- Reflection: In what ways do Miah and Ellie try to convince others around them to be less judgmental? How do their friends and family react to their perspectives? When do Miah and Ellie fail to speak up for their relationship in the face of discrimination?
- Reflection: Could Miah and Ellie have done anything to change the outcome of this book? If yes, what? If no, then how might they have changed the world around them if they had been given more time together? What would they have to do to foster a lasting, strong relationship in the face of discrimination?
  - Action: What positions of power do I hold? How *do* I use this power? How *might* I use this power?
  - Action: How can I use my privilege to improve the situations of others in my community?
  - Action: How can I help others recognize their privilege without inducing guilt?[1]
  - Action: How can I encourage my peers to stop using offensive, discriminatory language, especially in social conversations?
  - Action: How can I use my words to engage peers and family members in meaningful conversation about social inequities?

If You Come Softly (1998) might also be used as a springboard into a participatory action research project that encourages students to see the power of their voices in action. Students might select and investigate a form or example of social inequity described in the novel. If students choose to examine racial profiling, for example, they might interview police officers, store clerks, teens, etc. to gather statistics and examples; administer a survey to teens to garner some idea of how often and on what grounds they have experienced such profiling; and monitor media coverage to see if any patterns regarding bias toward particular groups emerges. Students could make a presentation to classmates about this problem in our society, share statistics that demonstrate how pervasive the issue is, make a creative visual representation of the problem or the solution to be displayed in a showcase at the school, compile a list of local and national resources for citizens seeking help or information regarding this social inequity (such as organizations that assist minority youth with their education or that provide free attorney services for cases of discrimination), and complete a relevant written component (an essay or a reflection).

If students prefer to express their voices through creative forms, they might write and share a creative piece (poem or short story) about a time when they

were incorrectly judged or when they incorrectly judged someone else. Or, students might make their voices heard in the media by writing a relevant op-ed piece for submission to the school or community newspaper.

Raining Sardines (Flores-Galbis, 2007) follows two young adults as they attempt to transcend the social hierarchy that has traditionally conquered, quite literally, their native island of Cuba. Set just prior to the revolution in 1959, Enriquito and Ernestina become entangled with Don Rigol, a wealthy landowner who owns the town's mountain and unrightfully possesses a magical locket made of legendary Taino gold. Once Enriquito learns that the locket belongs to his ancestors, the political inequality of the situation becomes a personal fight against injustice for the young boy. He and Ernestina set out on a surreal adventure to return the locket to its rightful owner and empower the people to claim the mountain for themselves, thus bringing justice to the island town.

This novel provides an ideal means for moving students from awareness to action in the fight for social justice. To help students shift from text to self to community, teachers might ask them to engage in a three-step questioning process (see Figs. 1–3). The first step considers general discussion questions based on one theme of *Raining Sardines.* The second then addresses specific questions based on anecdotes from the text, while the third provides questions meant to encourage students to reflect on their realities. Teachers might then encourage students to use their responses to the "Examining Your Reality" questions to brainstorm "Awareness into Action" activities (as described in additional detail within each theme).

Figure 1. Theme: How does ownership influence social class?

Thought Questions	Examining the Text	Examining My Reality
What does it mean to own something? What can be owned or possessed? What cannot? Why?	Why is the possession of the gold watch so important to Enriquito? To Alysia? To Don Rigol? What does each character wish to own? What are the implications of such ownership?	What possessions are most important to me? Why? What would I do if I had one of my most treasured possessions stolen from me?

Possible "Awareness into Action" Activity
Ask students to spend a scheduled period of time (20 minutes, one whole class period, one day, etc.) recording each time they use a possessive pronoun to describe a person or thing (*my, ours, hers*). For each situation in which they express some form of ownership, have them ask themselves: Do I truly *own* the object, person, etc. that I modified using the possessive *my*? Why did I verbally tie that object or person to myself? What is the ultimate importance of ownership? Ask students to try going for another scheduled period of time *without* using possessive pronouns. Pose the questions, "Was this a difficult thing to do? Why or why not?"

Figure 2. Theme: How important is tradition in determining social class?

Thought Questions	Examining the Text	Examining My Reality
What is a tradition? Why do people follow tradition? How might traditions influence perceptions of social class? Do social class implications change from generation to generation? Why or why not?	What traditions are practiced in Enriquito and Ernestina's community? What role does El Viejo play in keeping traditions alive? What role does Don Rigol play in keeping traditions alive?	What traditions are followed in my society? Do these traditions create any barriers between groups of people? Are they fair or unfair? Who establishes traditions in my family or community?

continued on next page

Figure 2. Continued

Possible "Awareness into Action" Activity
Ask students to choose three traditions their family members, friends, neighborhood community, townspeople, etc., follow. Have them create a written and visual web that describes and displays the *who, what, where, when, why, and how* of this tradition. Pose this scenario: Imagine that, this year, your group will no longer practice that tradition. What would your life be like in the absence of this tradition? What would happen if your town's Fourth of July parade was cancelled and could not be celebrated? What if, in spite of turning 15, you or someone you care about will not have a quinceañera like her older sisters did? Ask students to write a one-page reflection on the loss of their tradition, and be prepared to share their thoughts in a discussion centered on the value and power of tradition.

Figure 3. Theme: How do economics affect social class?

Thought Questions	Examining the Text	Examining My Reality
What is wealth?What do wealthy people control? What is a meritocracy?What is hard work? Who has the power to control the economy?	Who works hard in *Raining Sardines*? Who does not? How are these characters rewarded for their hard work—or lack of hard work? Who determines the town's major economic decisions?	Who has the power to control my economy? How have I gained an awareness of the economic standing of those around me? Does this affect how I treat others?

Possible "Awareness into Action" Activity
Ask students to work in groups of three. Have each group member research an occupation and describe what life might be like for one who works such a job. One member will research an occupation that pays a $150,000 salary, another member an occupation that pays a $40,000 salary, and the third member an occupation that pays a $12,000 salary. Each member should consider the cost of living for each occupation, how much time the worker must spend at his or her job, how much effort he or she must contribute, how many people he or she must support, and so on. Direct individual students to generate a written profile of a person having the determined occupation, locate a magazine clipping to provide visual appeal, and give the worker a name and personality. Then ask students to use his/her profile and those created by other group members to draft a brief screenplay showing an interaction between these characters. Students should be prepared to explain why specific characters acted as they did and what this might reveal about society. After each group performs its screenplay, the audience will analyze the interactions and discuss the implications regarding how economics might affect social class.

A Call to Action

The YA texts described here (along with additional options, such as those in the sidebar on p. 00) serve as excellent resources for helping students engage with fiction and life in critically literate ways and redefine their conceptions of self and other through story. In their treatment of contemporary social issues, these novels provide teenagers the opportunity to "affirm, contradict, negotiate, challenge, transform, and empower" (Darder, p. 99). By engaging in such behaviors, students learn to perform their duties as citizens in a democratic classroom; they "address questions related to moral and political agency within the process of their schooling and the course of their everyday lives" (Darder, p. 99). They learn to acknowledge the inequities that exist within their social communities and begin to develop both the consciousness and skills necessary for social change.

We live in a democratic nation, yet it is obvious that not every US citizen shares equally in the freedoms and great promise of America. Change will always be needed. Because the media now constantly

exposes the goings-on of our social and political leaders and floods us with information about their decisions, both good and bad, it can be overwhelming and discouraging to stand as a silent witness to all of the changes, trends, and policies pushed forth by people in power and to feel helpless and voiceless in the wake of these happenings. That is why it is especially important in today's world that our young people truly believe in the power of words, the power of *their* words. We need our students to recognize that their ideas are valuable and that they *can* create change by increasing their own awareness, starting conversations with others, asking tough questions, and engaging in meaningful dialogue about real issues.

So share a story of personal victory with your students, perhaps a letter you wrote to a local paper or congressperson that was recognized, but also prepare your students by sharing the many instances of disappointment you have also endured: the complaints that were filed but went unaddressed, the moments you fought for something you believed in and lost. We must not only teach our students to be leaders; we must model the actions for them. Let's use the YA texts we read in the classroom to go beyond a simple understanding of literature to an examination of self and our world and the spurring of social action. These potential victories and failures in our attempts at being heard and valued are part of real life. But each day is a grand conversation in which our identities, social codes, and politics are constructed and adjusted. Let's make sure our students are no longer voiceless bystanders, but active contributors to this magical, transformative dialogue that shapes us all.

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***Ricki Ginsberg** has been actively involved with ALAN for the past six years and is currently a member of the ALAN*

Other YA Titles to Consider in the Promotion of Critical Literacy

Anderson, L. H. (2008). *Chains*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.

Anderson, L. H. (2010). *Forge*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.

Angel, A. (Ed.). (2007). *Such a pretty face: Short stories about beauty.* New York, NY: Amulet.

Bauer, J. (2008). *Peeled*. New York, NY: Putnam.

Beah, I. (2007). *A long way gone: Memoirs of a boy soldier*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Beam, C. (2011). *I am J*. New York, NY: Little, Brown.

Bertagna, J. (2008). *Exodus*. New York, NY: Walker.

Bartoletti, S. C. (2008). *The boy who dared*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

Booth, C. (2006). *Tyrell*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

Canales, V. (2005). *The tequila worm*. New York, NY: Wendy Lamb.

Carman, P. (2007). *Atherton: The house of power*. New York, NY: Little, Brown.

Coy, J. (2008). *Box out*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

De la Peña, M. (2009). *We were here*. New York, NY: Delacorte.

Doctorow, C. (2008). *Little brother*. New York, NY: Tor.

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Flake, S. (2005). *Bang!* New York, NY: Hyperion.

Fuqua, J. (2002). *Darby*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick.

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Note

1 We recognize that not all of our students enjoy privilege in the same way. Some have gender and/or race in their invisible knapsacks, while others might benefit from their socioeconomic status or mobility. However, we argue that, in the contexts in which we work, all of our students possess some form of privilege by virtue of their American identity, an essential recognition if we are to encourage them to consider their place in the larger global community.

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