

## Contextualizing Metaphors of Literacy in Young Adult Literature (2000–2013)

Literacy can be difficult to conceptualize. What counts as an important literacy practice in one context—solitarily penning song lyrics in one’s bedroom or texting peers, for example—may not be privileged in a high school English class. Metaphors and their attending comparisons are useful in extending meaning for constructs like literacy that are difficult to pin down. Consequently, anthropologist Sylvia Scribner (1984) used metaphors to assign categories for literacy that could not be captured through traditional assessment methods. In doing so, she established that the Vai tribes in Liberia demonstrated sophisticated literate behaviors that were not being captured with traditional assessment methods. Scribner’s metaphors can also be used to illustrate how literacy is described in literature by showing how particular kinds of reading or writing or symbolic communication codification systems are valued or not valued in various contexts.

Scribner’s first metaphor, literacy as adaptation, reflects “the level of proficiency necessary for effective performance in a range of settings and customary activities” (p. 3). Most of what literacy powerbrokers, including lawmakers, administrators, and even some language teachers, term “literacy” is actually school literacy and does not capture what an individual can do in a group engaged in authentic community literacy practices in which community members negotiate complex meanings using literacy tools (Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000). The metaphor of literacy as adaptation tends to focus on decontextualized reading and writing skills valued in school for

high-stakes assessment purposes and may contribute to deficit thinking about adolescents in education and social systems (Kelder, 1996). Kaplan (2011) rejects the reductionist thinking of the literacy as adaptation model when he observes that contemporary adolescents are still “drawn to good stories for the same reasons as adolescents before them: they want to read for fun, for meaning, and for the joy of language itself” (p. 4).

Literacy as a state of grace, Scribner’s second metaphor, observes that “the power and functionality of literacy is not bounded by political or economic parameters but in a sense transcends them; the literate individual’s life derives its meaning and significance from intellectual, aesthetic, and spiritual participation in the accumulated creations and knowledge of humankind, made available through the written word” (p. 5). Literacy as a state of grace elevates the literate individual who is transformed through literacy practices to become a better person.

In contrast, literacy as power, the third and final metaphor Scribner describes, “emphasizes a relationship between literacy and a group or community advancement” (p. 5). Literacy as power situates literacy within a group setting, benefitting members of that group. Taking on a metaphor of literacy as power means that readers take on a critical literacy perspective in which they interrogate a text while reading such text in terms of the voices that come through as well as the voices that remain silent. Using a metaphor of literacy as power means questioning how the world is represented in literature by examining how

constructions of gender, race, social class, and ethnicity are connected to the lives of students and using discourse space to negotiate such meaning with peers who do the same (Serafini, 2007).

The term “literacy practices” is an important construct for discerning which literacy metaphors are at work in a given context. Street (1984) defines literacy practices as beliefs that people have about reading or writing when they are engaged in such practices. For Street and for us, personal or communal ideology is a critical part of literacy. The meanings within a text can be better understood when the contexts of community or individual literacy practices around the text are understood.

The purpose of this article is to examine the literacy practices of adolescent and adult protagonists in recent (2000–2013) award-winning literature in terms of the dominant literacy metaphors that Scribner presents. We also present four additional metaphors that extend beyond or reflect hybrid versions of the metaphors that Scribner presents. We believe these metaphors can be used to make assertions about how literacy in important cultural texts is situated ideologically by gender and ethnicity. Although our society tends to avoid critical and open discussions of gender and race (Tatum, 2008), literature study affords us an avenue to do so with the clarity of situated examples when protagonist actions are described in ways that map onto our recognizable experiences so that we can self-reflect while reading (Bruns, 2011). Literature study also affords us some distance because textual characters are physically separated from the everyday, what object relations psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott observed as the sweet spot halfway between the self and the external world that allows more insight as the result of distance (as cited in Bruns, 2011). Furthermore, literature study allows private reading ideologies to become public and to be listened to in a community setting (Mace, 1992). Metaphors can be utilized as tools to better understand literacy ideologies represented in literature and can also be used as themes that give insight into cultural values (Scribner, 1984).

## Previous Research

Previous content analyses have been conducted with award-winning children’s literature regarding rep-

resentations of gender and race. In 1972, Suzanne Czaplinski studied sexism in award-winning Caldecott picturebooks from 1940–1971 using gender representations in both text and pictures. She found that males comprised 65% of literary characters and 63% of pictures. In the 1950s and 1960s, the proportion of women represented in texts and pictures decreased. A follow-up study replicating Czaplinski’s design methodology (David & McDaniel, 1999) for titles selected from 1972–1997 revealed that males comprised 60% of characters portrayed in pictures. More recently, West (2010) conducted a content analysis of middle school literary texts used in North Carolina schools and found that 52% contained male protagonists, 35% had female protagonists, and 23% contained no gender-distinguishable protagonist.

Content analyses conducted solely on young adult texts also indicate disparities in representations of gender and race of protagonists. By 2011, 8 of 11 protagonists in Michael J. Printz award winners were non-White or non-American; 7 of the 11 protagonists were male, and 4 were female (Bodart, Barrineau, & Flamino 2011). Upon closer analysis of quality young adult texts as well as popular texts, however, researchers found that only 20% of young adult texts could be truly considered multicultural literature (Koss & Teale, 2009). Although many books included international settings, protagonists tended to be culturally similar to middle class American protagonists, and characters tended not to reveal deep insights about cultural diversity.

Theories have emerged on how to read young adult literature more inclusively. Observing that Whiteness can serve as a lens that “makes visible a constellation of institutional privileges benefiting White Americans that exist largely unnoticed” (p. 212), Shieble (2012) posits that a critical look at Whiteness is necessary but often absent in young adult literature. Ryan and Herman-Wilmarth (2013)

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urge sophisticated readers to approach texts with a multicultural lens and ask what kinds of protagonists tend to be included or avoided in literary texts. This study is an attempt at such an investigation.

## Our Process

In our quest to understand the metaphors of literacy at work in recent award-winning literature, we selected

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books with adolescent or adult human protagonists that had won the Gold Newbery, Orbis Pictus, or Michael L. Printz award during the years 2000–2013. We wanted to include adult protagonists to see if metaphors of literacy can change across the lifespan. We also wanted to include fiction and nonfiction texts with protagonists more likely to be young adolescents (Newbery protagonists) and older adolescents (Orbis Pictus protagonists). And we selected the range in years

from 2000–2013 to provide an updated content analysis and examine the latest and greatest books with adolescent and adult protagonists (and, more practically, to include all Michael L. Printz recipients, given the award’s beginnings in 2000). Four Newbery award winners were excluded from the content analysis because of having animal or child protagonists: *The One and Only Ivan* (2013 winner [Applegate, 2012]) and *The Tale of Despereaux: Being the Story of a Mouse, a Princess, Some Soup, and a Spool of Thread* (2004 winner [DiCamillo, 2006]) with animal protagonists, *The Higher Power of Lucky* (2007 winner [Patron, 2007]) and *Bud, Not Buddy* (2000 winner [Curtis, 1999]) with ten-year-old protagonists.

The Newbery Award is given annually by the Association for Library Service to Children “to the author of the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children” (Association for Library Service to Children). All of the Newbery Gold Awards from 2000–2013 are for fiction books. The NCTE

Orbis Pictus Award is given annually by the National Council of Teachers of English for “promoting and recognizing excellence in the writing of nonfiction for children” (National Council of Teachers of English). The Michael L. Printz Award is given annually by the American Library Association to honor “the best book written for teens, based entirely on its literary merit, each year” (Young Adult Library Service Association). All of the Michael L. Printz awards from 2000–2013 were for fiction books. In all, 38 fiction and nonfiction books were included in our analysis.

Our analysis consisted of closely reading all books, noting the gender and ethnicity of every adolescent or adult protagonist, documenting every protagonist’s literacy practice and the results of that literacy practice, and cross-checking each other’s analysis for thematic agreement in terms of dominant metaphor for contextualizing protagonists’ literacy practice. For our purposes, literacy practices were defined as “reading, writing, and other modes of symbolic communication that are often valued differently by people” (Alvermann, 2001, p. 4). This definition echoes Street’s (1984) description of literacy practices as beliefs that people have about reading or writing when they are engaged in them; in the context of our study, however, it also encompasses “symbolic communication,” such as musical notation, pictorial notation, numeracy, and symbolic action, intended to deliver a message as literacy. For example, when Daisy, protagonist in *How I Live Now* (Rosoff, 2004), starves her body to show her self-loathing, we considered this a kind of symbolic literacy practice.

Literacy practices of protagonists in these books ranged from appreciation of particular words to penning entire books. To arrive at the dominant metaphor(s) at work in the text, we counted literacy practices and the results of those literacy practices. In cases where multiple voices were used to tell a story and a central protagonist was not apparent, we noted every character or group literacy practice. A dominant metaphor for literacy was established through interpreting the lists we created of the protagonist’s literacy practices and coming to consensus in terms of the dominant metaphor at work, based on the number of literacy practices we recorded. We did not include cover art or illustrations in our coding. Our analysis is available in Tables A1 (Newbery texts), A2 (Orbis Pictus Texts), and A3 (Michael J. Printz texts).

To provide a contextual example of these coding practices, we offer the following example. In the 2013 Michael L. Printz Award book *In Darkness* (Lake, 2012), Shorty, the 15-year-old Haitian protagonist, lives his life in the slums of Site Soley and becomes trapped in the rubble of a hospital. We documented 20 different literacy practices that he uses to tell his story, including passing time by counting his blessings, metacognitively using American gangster rap discourse to create a personal and collective identity, mapping reading to participate in illegal and underground activity, and making references to the Christian rapture. Two readers read and analyzed each book and came to consensus regarding the protagonist's implicit or explicit purpose in telling his or her story and the dominant metaphor at work in the telling of that story. In the case of Shorty, researchers agreed that the protagonist's epiphany occurs when the spirit of a faithful son of Haiti, Toussaint, merges with Shorty's spirit and gives him renewed hope for Haiti. As Shorty begins the journey to become the kind of person who redresses the balance for his people, we applied literacy as power as the dominant metaphor to represent Shorty's literacy practices.

### **Gender Representation of Adolescent and Adult Protagonists in Recent Gold Winners**

We discovered that gender representation in Newbery and Orbis Pictus Gold winners has become more balanced since the 2000 Gold Award. Four adolescent or adult protagonists have been male; four have been female; and two, including *Good Masters! Sweet Ladies! Voices from a Medieval Village* (Schlitz, 2007) and *Criss Cross* (Perkins, 2007), have included both male and female protagonists. In Orbis Pictus Gold winners, five adolescent and adult protagonists have been male (Martin Luther King, Jr., civil rights leader; Marcel Marceau, mime; Anthony Sarg, founder of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade; York, William Clark's slave and adventurer; and Walter Anderson, artist). Five protagonists have been female (Martha Graham, dance choreographer; Marian Anderson, singer and social rights activist; Amelia Earhart, adventure pilot and women's rights activist; Lisa Dabek, zoologist and environmental educator; and Ruby Bridges, civil rights activist). Four Orbis Pictus Gold winners included both male and female characters: *Children of the Great Depression* (Freedman, 2005); *An American Plague:*

*The True and Terrifying Story of the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793* (Murphy, 2003); *Black Potatoes: The Story of the Great Irish Famine* (Bartoletti, 2001); and *Hurry Freedom: African Americans in Gold Rush California* (Stanley, 2000). Although *Ballet for Martha: Making Appalachian Spring* (Greenberg & Jordan, 2010) praises Martha Graham's collaboration with two males, Aaron Copeland and Isamu Noguchi, we considered Martha the primary protagonist because she has noticeably more time and space devoted to her efforts and name recognition in the title. In contrast to the Newbery and Orbis Pictus Gold winners, Printz protagonists are, as of this date, more unbalanced in terms of gender. Ten protagonists are male, and four are female.

It is noteworthy that the male and female protagonists exclude LGBTQ characters. The absence of this group indicates the conflation of sex and gender identity in the portrayals in young adult literature. It may be the belief of authors that heterosexuality is normal and homosexuality is not, or this may be an omission based on the genderized identities of authors. However, this kind of silencing of important voices does have consequences of normalizing heterosexual identity and marginalizing LGBTQ readers and LGBTQ advocates (Blackburn & Smith, 2010).

### **Race of Adolescent and Adult Protagonists in Recent Gold Winners**

Across all three awards, protagonists were much less balanced in terms of race. Of the 38 Gold winners included in this analysis, 23 have protagonists who are identified as White. Seven protagonists are African American or African, four are Asian, and four are a combination of races or race is unknown. Of the 10 Newbery Gold award winners, eight have White protagonists (five are American, and three are English), one has a Japanese American protagonist, and one has a Korean protagonist. No protagonists in recent Newbery Gold winners are African American, African, or Hispanic (with the exception of Bud from *Bud, not Buddy*, a book not included in this analysis because of the protagonist's young age).

Of the 14 Orbis Pictus Gold Award winners, seven have White protagonists (five American, one French, one a population of Irish individuals). Four protagonists are African American, one is an African slave, and one text includes several African American

characters. No Orbis Pictus protagonists are Asian or Hispanic, but two Gold winners have protagonists possessing combinations of racial heritages: *Children of the Great Depression* (Freedman, 2005) and *An American Plague: The True and Terrifying Story of the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793* (Murphy, 2003). Both of these historical accounts demonstrate how, in hard times, African Americans and minorities suffered more than their White counterparts.

Of the 14 Printz Gold winners, eight protagonists are White (four Americans, three English characters, one Australian). Two are Black (one African American and one Haitian). Two are Asian (one Chinese American and one Korean American). Two protagonists have unknown ethnic heritages. Nailor Lopez, protagonist in Paolo Bacigalupi's *Ship Breaker* (2009), lives in a post-racial world where social class, rather than race, determines differences in power. Bobby, the male protagonist in Angela Johnson's *The First Part Last* (2003), has light brown skin on the cover of the book we read but describes himself as "pale white ghost boy beside the brown girl" (p. 60). No protagonists of any Gold winners are Hispanic.

## Contextualizing Metaphors of Literacy by Gender and Race

### Literacy as Adaptation

Literacy as adaptation was a dominant metaphor in two Newbery Gold winners and three Printz Gold winners. Of the 38 titles, literacy as adaptation was a dominant metaphor for the male protagonists in three books (*The Graveyard Book* [Gaiman, 2008], *The First Part Last* [Johnson, 2003], and *Monster* [Myers, 1999]) and the female protagonists in two books (*A Year Down Yonder* [Peck, 2000] and *A Step from Heaven* [Na, 2001]). No Orbis Pictus title contained a dominant metaphor of literacy as adaptation. Of the 38 titles, literacy as adaptation was a dominant metaphor in 13% of the titles. In this category, 40% of protagonists were White, 40% were non-White, and 20% were uncategorized.

When protagonists read and wrote or used symbolic language predominantly to maintain their current social and economic identity or to assimilate into an economic system, we coded the dominant metaphor as literacy as adaptation. When protagonists were expected to participate in school learning

but described no personal pleasure in such learning, we coded the book's dominant literacy as metaphor as adaptation. We also used this metaphor to capture protagonist literacy activities that allowed them to make sense of or participate in a non-school setting in which they had no social power, like taking notes in a courtroom while they were a defendant (the setting of *Monster*). Two White protagonists describe dominant literacy practices as adaptation—Bod from *The Graveyard Book* and Mary Alice from *A Year Down Yonder*. Both Bod and Mary Alice eventually use literacy to connect to other human beings, but the majority of literacy practices for both demonstrate the adaptation metaphor.

Two protagonists who demonstrate literacy as adaptation as a dominant metaphor are presented as non-White. In *Step from Heaven*, Ju-Park, a Korean immigrant whose family has moved to the United States, describes school as a confusing place that will help her become an American in the future. Steve Harmon, the 16-year-old African American male protagonist in *Monster*, uses literacy practices to investigate his identity as a good or bad person while in prison, on trial, and after acquittal. The reactions of others let him know that the world he lives in sees a Black male largely as a bad person. Although not described as African American (even though the book cover portrays him as having light brown skin), Bobby, a teenage father who is grieving the loss of the mother of his baby in *The First Part Last*, is trying to stay awake in school and survive for the sake of his child.

### Literacy as a State of Grace

Literacy as a state of grace was a more prevalent metaphor for male protagonists than for female protagonists across the three awards. Eleven male protagonists in 10 books and 4 female protagonists in 4 books demonstrated this dominant metaphor, a notable difference across genders. Titles across all three Gold awards feature protagonists who expressed this dominant metaphor, but only 1 title was an Orbis Pictus Award winner, whereas 5 were Newbery Award winners, and 7 were Printz Award winners.

White protagonists were most likely to demonstrate a dominant metaphor of a state of grace. White male protagonists, represented in 8 books, were most likely to portray literacy as enriching their lives and making them more informed or better individuals.

White males learn many lessons through reading and writing practices that offered them insight into their own lives: Jack Gantos (*Dead End in Norvelt* [Gantos, 2011]) learns the importance of history and that he has a place in history, as does Crispin (*Crispin: The Cross of Lead* [Avi, 2002]), whose story is told in 1377 England. Male characters in contemporary realistic fiction, such as Cullen Winter (*Where Things Come Back* [Whaley, 2011]), Cameron Smith (*Going Bovine* [Bray, 2009]), Miles Halter (*Looking for Alaska* [Green, 2005]), and Jacob Todd (*Postcards from No Man's Land* [Chambers, 2002]), use their reading and writing practices for therapeutic reasons as they struggle with aspects of their identity and grapple with existential questions.

Non-White protagonists also used literacy to affirm their identities, although less commonly in the corpus of data. Danny, in *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2006), uses literacy to affirm his hybrid identity as both Chinese and American. Katie, a Japanese American female protagonist in *Kira-Kira* (Kadohata, 2004), learns from her sister that words help to elevate the everyday and can be used as tools for ethnic identity and expressions of love to others.

### Literacy as Power

Female protagonists were more likely to portray a dominant metaphor of literacy as power (6 female protagonists) than were male protagonists (4 male protagonists) across all three award categories. Nine of 23 White protagonists demonstrated a dominant literacy metaphor of power. White female protagonists were more likely to use literacy to advance the social and economic conditions of self and others. For example, Abilene Tucker, the 12-year-old White female protagonist in 2011 Newbery Award-winning *Moon over Manifest* (Vanderpool, 2010), uses reading and writing to decipher the mystery of her father's past and brings the town together to help heal old wounds and create a hospitable future in which community members pass out free ice water to travelers driving through town during the Great Depression.

Three White male protagonists demonstrated a dominant literacy metaphor of literacy as power. Some are symbolic in their approach of sending messages to engage and enlighten communities. Marcel Marceau (born Marcel Mangel, later changing his name to hide his Jewish identity) uses silence and

movement to enter the world of other living things and tell his story of being a Holocaust survivor (*Actors without Words: Monsieur Marceau*, Schubert, 2012).

Others share a message about being American. Anthony "Tony" Sarg creates a carnival-like parade using symbolic balloons to unite immigrants to the United States who miss the holiday traditions from their old countries (*Balloons over Broadway: The True Story of the Puppeteer of Macy's Parade*, Sweet, 2011).

Only one non-White character displayed power as a dominant literacy metaphor: Shorty, the Haitian male protagonist of *In Darkness* (Lake, 2012). Shorty begins a prophetic journey to fight for his people—Haitians struggling to stay alive within the tumult of escalating violence.

### Adding Metaphors: Literacy of Inclusion and Denial, Literacy of Justice or Injustice

Some books did not seem to fit easily into Scribner's three metaphors for literacy but could be conceptualized instead as various combinations of metaphors and reflections of history. We were compelled to establish four additional metaphors: literacy as historical inclusion, denial of literacy, literacy as justice, and literacy as injustice.

Literacy as historical inclusion captured an author's decision to include many voices across gender and racial constructs, particularly historically disenfranchised voices, to characterize a historical era. These books tended not to have one primary protagonist, but many. Three of the 38 books, about 8% of the texts of this research, were coded as having inclusion as a dominant metaphor, including Russell Freedman's 2006 Orbis Pictus winner, *Children of the Great Depression*; Jim Murphy's *An American Plague: The True and Terrifying Story of the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793* (2003); and Susan Campbell Bartoletti's *Black Potatoes: The Story of the Great Irish Famine* (2001). Freedman's work includes interviews and artifact analysis reflecting the historical experiences of White, Black, Asian, and Hispanic children during the

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Great Depression. The addition of such voices offers a more complete historical interpretation of an American experience during a decade of financial hardship.

Two titles highlighted how individuals or groups of people were categorically and systemically not given access to functional literacy skills because they were considered less than other humans. We assigned these texts a dominant metaphor of denial of literacy.

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Rhoda Blumberg’s *York’s Adventures with Lewis and Clark: An African-American’s Part in the Great Expedition* (2004) explicitly mourns the fact that the Clark family deliberately did not educate a slave, in spite of his obvious intelligence, because it was thought that books could incite slave revolt. Excerpts from the diaries of White men illustrate that York was crucial in establishing relations with Native Americans several times, and yet Clark sold him afterwards for “up-

pity” behaviors. Denial of literacy is also the dominant metaphor for the many children born in the “wrong” social class of 1255 England who never learned to read or write, as reflected in Laura Amy Schlitz’s *Good Masters! Sweet Ladies! Voices from a Medieval Village* (2007).

We also established two additional metaphors that build upon the denial of literacy and Scribner’s existing metaphors to explore how human agency through literacy can result in personal or community change. We coined the metaphor “literacy as justice” to capture examples when protagonists experience denial of literacy but move through stages of literacy as adaptation to literacy as a state of grace to literacy as power. This happens in four texts with African American protagonists, including Ruby Bridges (Bridges & Lundell, 1999), Martin Luther King Jr. (Bolden, 2007), Marian Anderson (Ryan, 2002), and the African American men who participated in California’s gold rush (Stanley, 2000).

We coined the term literacy as injustice to capture examples of when protagonists experience denial

of literacy but move from literacy as adaptation to literacy as a state of grace. Although the protagonist changes because of his/her literacy practices, society did/does not change. One protagonist fits this category. Although Nailer Lopez, the protagonist in Paolo Bacigalupi’s *Ship Breaker* (2009), lives in the dystopian future, learns to read, and seemingly improves his own economic future, his world does not change.

## **Situating Metaphors in Terms of Race and Gender**

The Gold award on the cover of these books matters. It symbolizes the best texts produced the preceding year for a given genre. However, taken as a group, Gold winners also portray divergent metaphors of literacy at work in protagonist literacy practices in terms of race and gender. Because literature reflects society and traverses private and public places and spaces, it is a useful tool for examining and questioning the state of social justice in contemporary society. When White protagonists primarily manifest literacy as power in their literacy practices, readers of all genders and races can interpret these White protagonists as better, smarter people. Although gains have been made in the variety of protagonists’ gender and race, we are troubled at a continuing dearth of ethnic diversity in recent Gold winners. We are also troubled by a comparative lack of representation of the literacy as power metaphor for White male protagonists, particularly because White males have tended historically to hold power. Instead, when White males are most likely to use their literacy practices to benefit themselves, as they do in the overall findings of this content analysis, they portray a picture of the White male as more likely to use literacy for personal betterment instead of extending his insights to others for collective enlightenment.

Newbery Gold winners tend to feature protagonists who enact literacy as a state of grace. These books are equally divided in portraying male and female protagonists, but only 20% of recent texts have non-White protagonists, and those are Asian and do not portray a dominant metaphor of literacy as power or justice.

Orbis Pictus Gold winners with protagonists who have actually lived tend to feature people who enact literacy using metaphors of power and justice—the two most important metaphors according to Scribner

(1984) and for us. The characters in the Orbis Pictus winners are equally divided between male and female and show more racial diversity, with half of protagonists being African American or including more than one race.

Printz winners tend to feature male protagonists who enact metaphors of literacy as a state of grace. A full 71% of Printz protagonists are male, an unequal gender divide, and 43% are Black, Asian, or of unknown ethnicity.

Our analysis is descriptive and not meant to be highly interpretive. We leave our research with many questions about what our findings mean. Can literacy metaphors be used as tools to guide adolescents to recognize that literacy ideologies, though often implicit, are at work in culturally valued texts? What do (under)representations of literacy metaphors, especially those containing power and state of grace, mean to readers of young adult literature? Does it matter, for example, that more male protagonists are represented in Printz winners? And why is the race of protagonists, especially compared with gender, so unbalanced, with over three times the presence of White protagonists than African American protagonists? Why do dominant metaphors of literacy fluctuate as they do in terms of gender and race? There are many other questions about protagonist diversity and their correlations with literacy practices that could also be asked.

We believe that the metaphors of literacy we have shared can be explicitly taught to students and used as critical literacy vocabulary to understand how literacy practices, or the absence of them, can affect socioeconomic or sociocultural power that benefits individuals and communities. When introduced to the metaphors, our preservice teacher education students have understood them fairly quickly because these metaphors have been at work in their lives. Once understood, they serve as language to compare one ideology of literacy practice with another. When gender and race (or other human categories like sexuality or religion) are brought into the discussion, students can make assertions about why one metaphor might be attributed to one character but not to another. It is a very important tool for students living in the era when critical and open discussions of gender and race are often avoided (Tatum, 2008).

Furthermore, we think that underrepresentation of protagonist gender and race does matter. Two of the authors of this article are non-White. As they read

the data, the books that resonated with them the most were the texts that mapped onto their cultural heritages. When Xu, a Chinese doctoral student currently living in the United States, read *American Born Chinese*, she spent more time in reflection than when reading the other texts. *American Born Chinese* contains a familiar story that allowed her to make text-to-text connections that cultural outsiders might not be as readily able to make. A particular character, the Monkey King (known as Sun Wokong in Mandarin), acquires supernatural powers through his Taoist literacy practices. His abilities are commonly attributed to contrary acts of rebellion, such as disobedience against the gods who despise him, loyalty to his master Xuanzang, and dedication to his faith. The Monkey King is usually the archetype of the hero to the majority of Chinese readers. The reward for the Monkey King, in the traditional story of Xu's acquaintance, is that he becomes a god in heaven after undertaking the harsh pilgrimage to the West.

However, in *American Born Chinese*, the Monkey King is depicted from another perspective. His disconnection from the gods is emphasized in the novel rather than his heroic image, because the theme in the novel concerns the relationship between an individual and society (similar to the construct of a literacy practice). The story lines of the Monkey King, Jin Wang, and Danny all converge in the end, conveying the message that an individual should embrace himself or herself, as there is no point in trying to be something one is not; society should be tolerant of others who are different, as each person does not know the internal struggle of others. The message of the text and its connection with her homeland afforded Xu new insight, one of the ultimate goals of literature study.

Kristi felt culturally embraced as she read *Kira Kira* and reflected on her family history. As a Japanese American who grew up in Los Angeles, she strongly identified with many of protagonist's cultural experiences, especially the importance of certain words that reflect her cultural identity. Growing up, Kristi and her sisters did not take any Japanese language classes, and English was spoken at home in order for her family to assimilate into American society. But, as her grandmother's first language was Japanese, she often spoke to Kristi's family using a hybrid of Japanese and English. Since Kristi and her sisters did not know Japanese, they often tried to guess what words meant using context clues, just as the protagonist in *Kira Kira*



did, and, to the dismay of her grandmother, mostly misunderstood what the Japanese words actually meant.

However, once Kristi and her sisters learned the meaning of a Japanese word, they would often use the Japanese word instead of the English word, since it was the “correct” word or more accurately represented what they were trying to convey. Often these words would become so integrated into family communication that Kristi’s family did not realize that non-Japanese speaking people did not know what that word meant and, after using a Japanese word, would often need to make a longer explanation in English. The message of *Kira Kira* and its connection with her lived experience allowed Kristi to further embrace her identity as Japanese American. Kristi knew many of the Japanese words used in *Kira-Kira*. She had used them growing up, which drew her deeply into a story that was similar in some ways to her own. It was a very affirming experience to relate to Katie, even though she lived at different times and in very different environments.

Kristi also had the experience of speaking very differently from how she looked, although, unlike the protagonist, she never received money to talk as a kind of performance for others’ amusement. Since all of her best friends were African American and had their own culturally influenced terminology and ways of speaking, her mother became concerned that she would become a “little black girl,” since she sounded like one. She still recalls strange looks from adults when her language did not match their expectations based on her appearance.

## Conclusion

Our students, who encompass the many pluralistic identities of young adults living in the United States, tell us frequently that their identification with protagonists, or lack thereof, does matter, that it is one of the deciding factors in investing emotionally in a book. Our students tend to observe that cultural similarities matter more than gender affiliation.

The absence of culturally mapped texts seems to have a lot to do with the cultural heritages of authors themselves. It is likely that Hispanic protagonists are missing because Hispanic authors of young adult literature are largely missing. Over time, concentrated effort to redress this silence could bear good fruit. In

fact, a primary goal of literacy and literature instructors of young adults should be to encourage the creation of the fiction and nonfiction stories of multicultural students.

Generations of readers need texts that map onto and affirm their experiences. Cultural outsiders to mainstream America need such stories to learn how literacy can be used for power and social justice. Cultural insiders to mainstream America, including White males, need these stories to empathetically relate to others and to redress silence. As young adult readers read about characters who are coming of age and learning to embrace their own personal identities, they can use the tools of literature to grapple with their own identities. When protagonists’ gender and ethnic characteristics do not mirror those of readers in an increasingly pluralistic society, or when adolescent readers do not see powerful literacy practices at work, important role models are glaringly absent. It is up to the literacy educators who teach for social justice to address these silences and gaps in important cultural artifacts of our time.

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## Appendices

**Table A1: Analysis of Newbery-winning Books**

Dominant metaphor of literacy	Year of award		Book Title	Author	Gender(s) of protagonist(s)	Ethnicity of protagonist(s)
State of Grace	2012		<i>Dead End in Norvelt</i>	Jack Gantos	Male	White (American)
Power	2011		<i>Moon over Manifest</i>	Clare Vanderpool	Female	White (American)
Power	2010		<i>When You Reach Me</i>	Rebecca Stead	Female	White (American)
Adaptation	2009		<i>The Graveyard Book</i>	Neil Gaiman	Male	White (English)
Denial of Literacy	2008		<i>Good Masters! Sweet Ladies! Voices from a Medieval Village</i>	Laura Amy Schlitz	Several Male and Female	White (English)
State of Grace	2006		<i>Criss Cross</i>	Lynne Rae Perkins	2 Male and 1 Female	White (American)
State of Grace	2005		<i>Kira-Kira</i>	Cynthia Kadohata	Female	Japanese-American
State of Grace	2003		<i>Crispin: The Cross of Lead</i>	Avi	Male	White (English)
State of Grace	2002		<i>A Single Shard</i>	Linda Sue Park	Male	Korean
Adaptation	2001		<i>A Year Down Yonder</i>	Richard Peck	Female	White (American)

Note: Newbery Awards for 2013, 2007, 2004, and 2000 are excluded from this list because they contain child or animal protagonists.

**Table A2: Analysis of Orbis Pictus-winning Books**

Dominant metaphor of literacy	Year of award		Book Title	Author	Gender(s) of protagonists	Ethnicity of protagonist(s)
Power	2013		<i>Actor without Words: Monsier Marceau</i>	Leda Schubert	Male	White (Jewish and French)
Power	2012		<i>Balloons over Broadway: The True Story of the Puppeteer of Macy's Parade</i>	Melissa Sweet	Male	White (American)
Power	2011		<i>Ballet for Martha: Making Appalachian Spring</i>	Jan Greenberg and Sandra Jordan	Female with male collaboration	White (American)
State of Grace	2010		<i>The Secret World of Walter Anderson</i>	Hester Bass	Male	White (American)
Power	2009		<i>Amelia Earhart: The Legend of the Lost Aviator</i>	Shelley Tanaka	Female	White (American)
Justice	2008		<i>M.L.K.: Journey of a King</i>	Tonya Bolden	Male	African American
Power	2007		<i>Quest for the Tree Kangaroo: An Expedition to the Cloud Forest of New Guinea</i>	Sy Montgomery	Female	White (American)
Historical Inclusion	2006		<i>Children of the Great Depression</i>	Russell Freedman	Male and Female	White, Black, Asian, Hispanic (American)
Denial of Literacy	2005		<i>York's Adventures with Lewis and Clark: An African-American's Part in the Great Expedition</i>	Rhoda Blumberg	Male	African descendant living in United States
Historical Inclusion	2004		<i>An American Plague: The True and Terrifying Story of the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793</i>	Jim Murphy	Male and Female	White and African (American)
Justice	2003		<i>When Marion Sang: The True Recital of Marian Anderson</i>	Pam Muñoz Ryan	Female	African American
Historical Inclusion	2002		<i>Black Potatoes: The Story of the Great Irish Famine</i>	Susan Campbell Bartoletti	Male and Female	White (Irish)
Justice	2001		<i>Hurry Freedom: African Americans in Gold Rush California</i>	Jerry Stanley	Male and Female	African American
Justice	2000		<i>Through My Eyes</i>	Ruby Bridges Margo Lundell	Female	African American

**Table A3: Analysis of Michael L. Printz-winning Books**

Dominant metaphor of literacy	Year of award		Book Title	Author	Gender(s) of protagonist(s)	Ethnicity of protagonist(s)
Power	2013		<i>In Darkness</i>	Nick Lake	Male	African Creole (Haiti)
State of Grace	2012		<i>Where Things Come Back</i>	John Corey Whaley	Male	White (American)
Injustice	2011		<i>Ship Breaker</i>	Paolo Bacigalupi	Male	No knowledge
State of Grace	2010		<i>Going Bovine</i>	Libba Bray	Male	White (American)
State of Grace	2009		<i>Jellicoe Road</i>	Melina Marchetta	Female	White (Australian)
State of Grace	2008		<i>The White Darkness</i>	Geraldine McCaughrean	Female	White (English)
State of Grace	2007		<i>American Born Chinese</i>	Gene Luen Yang	Male	Chinese American
State of Grace	2006		<i>Looking for Alaska</i>	John Green	Male	White (American)
Power	2005		<i>How I Live Now</i>	Meg Rosoff	Female	White (American living in England)
Adaptation	2004		<i>The First Part Last</i>	Angela Johnson	Male	Unsure—Brown skin on cover but describes himself as “pale white ghost boy beside the brown girl” (p. 60)
State of Grace	2003		<i>Postcards from No Man’s Land</i>	Aidan Chambers	Male	White (English)
Adaptation	2002		<i>A Step from Heaven</i>	An Na	Female	Korean American
Power	2001		<i>Kit’s Wilderness</i>	David Almond	Male	White (English)
Adaptation	2000		<i>Monster</i>	Walter Dean Meyers	Male	African American