

Complicating Race:

Representation and Resistance Using Arab and Asian American Immigrant Fictions

Historically, discussions of representation in multicultural literature, much like broader conversations of race and racial equality, have largely been conceptualized in terms of a Black/White racial paradigm (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), or the conception that race in the United States consists of only two constituent groups. This paradigm not only reproduces the conception that only the Black and the White races matter in discussions of race, but it also neglects the complex ways that race operates for other racial and ethnic groups in the United States. As Juan Perea (1997) writes: “The mere recognition that ‘other people of color’ exist, without careful attention to their voices, their histories, and their real presence, is merely a reassertion of the Black/White paradigm” (p. 133). For teachers, thinking within a Black/White binary limits their abilities to understand and respond to all students of color and create more thoughtful and race-conscious classrooms.

In this article, the authors argue that US immigrant fictions featuring Arab American and Asian American protagonists can serve as powerful, culturally responsive tools for disrupting the Black/White racial paradigm and facilitating discussions that can lead to more race-conscious educational spaces in preservice English teacher education and these students’ future classrooms. Using experiences teaching two US immigrant fictions, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006), by Mohja Kahf, and *American Born Chinese* (2006), by Gene Luen Yang, to two groups of preservice English teachers, the authors highlight the pedagogical possibilities and challenges of incorpo-

rating US immigrant fictions to complicate dominant constructions of race and promote understanding of immigrant student experiences. Readers—teacher educators and teachers—can adapt the described pedagogical approaches, given their teaching and learning contexts, in order to promote culturally responsive, race-conscious English instruction.

US Immigrant Fictions and Important Definitions

The two texts discussed in this article are examples of “US immigrant fictions,” or literature written by and featuring individuals who are US immigrants or children of US immigrants (Walkowitz, 2010). We use the term “US immigrant fictions” instead of the term “multicultural literature” as both a critique of the dominant narratives normalized through the term “multiculturalism” and as a move toward specificity in the forms of narratives that we believe help disrupt the Black/White racial binary and White privilege. According to the 2009 US Census, approximately 22.5% of all American students were immigrants or children of immigrants. Teaching immigrant fictions has the potential to disrupt harmful conceptions and constructions of race and ethnicity frequently imposed upon students of color while simultaneously highlighting the role that race still plays in the experiences of students of color.

While we believe that Latino/a immigrant fictions also offer a promising space for disrupting the Black/White binary and questioning privilege, this article fo-

cuses on two texts that feature first-generation immigrant characters, or the children of immigrants to the United States, written by first-generation Asian and Arab immigrant authors. The first text, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* by Mohja Kahf, describes the experiences of Khadra Shamy, a Syrian American teenager growing up in a close, Muslim family in 1970s Indiana. The second is *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang, a collection of three seemingly distinct stories that are connected thematically and, as the reader learns, literally. The three plotlines, in brief, feature the Monkey King and his quest to become a deity; Jin Wang, a young Chinese American, and his desire to be an all-American boy; and Danny (who turns out to be Jin Wang), a White adolescent struggling to fit in socially at his new high school.

By way of definition, culturally responsive teaching is a dynamic process that seeks to step outside conventional teaching models that reflect European American cultural values to provide instruction that connects to students' cultural knowledge and prior experiences in diverse educational settings (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Sleeter & Cornbleth, 2011). Geneva Gay (2010) defines culturally responsive teaching as "a routine and radical proposal" that "makes explicit the previously implicit role of culture in teaching and learning" and "filters curriculum content and teaching strategies through their cultural frames of reference to make the content more personally meaningful and easier to master" (p. 26). A race-conscious pedagogy (DiAngelo, 2011), furthermore, acknowledges the role that race, class, gender, and sexuality play in shaping what and how we know and that these different subject positions have the potential to critique dominant ways of knowing and being to increase equity and justice. The article concludes with a discussion and reference to critical scholarship that can be used in teacher education courses to help foster discussion around several important topics, including critical pedagogy, immigrant education, culturally responsive teaching, and power and positionality.

Below, the authors describe and reflect upon their pedagogical projects using these novels in teacher education courses for English education majors at the two universities in which they work. Despite teaching different texts in different contexts, similar possibilities and challenges exist for integrating immigrant fictions in teacher education coursework. Because

the interpretations of this pedagogical work—what worked and what could be better—are so similar, the authors felt it best to combine experiences in a joint effort of storytelling and reflection to help readers construct similar pedagogical projects using US immigrant fictions.

Why These Texts?

The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf (2006), written by Syrian-born, Arab American author Mohja Kahf, is a fictional story about Khadra Shamy and her memories growing up in a Syrian immigrant family in Indianapolis during the 1970s.

Based loosely on Kahf's childhood, the first portion of the book highlights Khadra's memories growing up in Indianapolis, emphasizing the religious values and practices that played a central role in her parents' lives. Against the background of a school and a community with varying interpretations of Islamic code, Khadra searches for her own answer to the question, "What does it mean to be Muslim in the United States?" In the second half of the book, Khadra re-

turns to Syria and goes through a series of experiences that cause her to question and re-question her relationship to her Muslim and Syrian American identities.

Kate elected to teach *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* as part of an undergraduate- and graduate-level Multicultural Literature class for preservice teachers. Her first reason for doing so was the lack of Arab American literature and art in discussions of multicultural literature in the United States. Before 2001, approximately 1.2 million Americans identified as having Arab ancestry (US Census, 2000); however, they were frequently "whitewashed" (Tehrani, 2009) or treated as "invisible citizens" who were simultaneously stereotyped by film and media while receiving no government support as minorities (Jamal & Naber,

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2008). After 2001, the nearly invisible Arab ethnic group became a “white but not white” racial minority that experienced increased scrutiny and targeting (Cainkar & Read, 2014). However, despite this, Arab Americans continue to have minimal access to govern-

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mental protections offered to other racial and ethnic minorities within the United States. Despite these shifts and contentions, Arab American literature is often missing from discussions of multicultural literature or representation in English curricula. Kate’s second reason for using this text was a desire to disrupt and challenge some of her preservice teachers’ conceptions of “multiculturalism,” which they often saw only as books featuring African American or Latino/a charac-

ters. Third, she wanted to introduce them to a piece of Arab American art that could be used to facilitate discussions around the genre of “American Literature” and the writing and reading practices of a high school English classroom.

Brandon chose to work with Gene Yang’s *American Born Chinese* (2006), which won early critical acclaim upon release, including the American Library Association’s Michael Printz Award in 2007. The first graphic novel to win the prize, *American Born Chinese* bested Printz Award finalists *An Abundance of Katherines* (by John Green) and *The Book Thief* (by Markus Zusak). Yang’s novel features three interconnected tales but centers on the experience of Jin Wang, a child of Chinese immigrants who struggles to fit in with his White peers at school. Thematically rich, the novel approaches issues of self-identity, relationships, Whiteness, and racism as these manifest for adolescents within in-school and out-of-school contexts. Jin desires to be White and to live with the social and cultural capital that Whiteness affords—a desire that the magical realism of the novel makes possible when Jin literally transforms himself into a White American boy named Danny. While it is possible for interpreta-

tions to center on issues of bullying, friendship, and identity, Brandon wanted his students to understand these issues as contextualized within social, cultural, and institutional histories and patterns of racism and Whiteness as capital.

Brandon selected *American Born Chinese* as a course text for several reasons. First, he wanted his students to become familiar with the genre of graphic novels and what these texts have to offer the English classroom. Second, he wanted students to read a literary text together *and* to read the text pedagogically, as a teacher would, and to plan a unit based on the novel. Most important, *American Born Chinese* offered an advantageous way to discuss racial identity and White privilege with (mostly) White students. In the past, his students in similar courses have resisted talking about race, particularly Black/White relations, claiming to suffer from “race-fatigue” and arguing that racial oppression and unearned privilege are no longer contemporary realities. Anticipating these possible resistances, Brandon’s use of *American Born Chinese*, which is centered on race and the allure of Whiteness but not explicitly Black/White race relations, seemed to open the door to these important conversations.

Contexts, Courses, and Data Analysis

The data for this study come from two different classrooms and two different universities. Both authors work as teacher educators at universities in the southern United States. Brandon teaches at a public university; Kate teaches at a private university. Both authors are White and recognize that their Whiteness awards them certain privileges when leading conversations about race, gender, and privilege in the classroom (DiAngelo, 2011). Sirin and Fine (2007) note that “Whiteness accrues privilege and status; gets itself surrounded by protective pillows of resources and/or benefits of the doubt [. . .]. Whiteness repels gossip and voyeurism and instead demands dignity” (qtd. in DiAngelo, p. 55).

The authors recognize such privilege accrues in the world and in classroom relationships with students. Even if conversations about race and White privilege cause mostly White students “racial stress” (DiAngelo, 2011), the authors believe they benefit from the “protective pillows of resources” that Whiteness affords. If teachers of color were to approach

similar topics with White students, their reception and the ensuing classroom dynamic could be quite different. Whiteness has the potential to reduce the number of obstacles and the degree of student resistance when discussing race, Whiteness, and privilege. As often as possible, both instructors tried to challenge this privilege by foregrounding the voices and writing of scholars of color to help lead thoughtful discussions of race and privilege.

This study was conducted retroactively. While teaching at different institutions, the authors maintained contact regarding teaching and scholarship; through these conversations, they discovered a shared interest and purpose for using graphic novels and immigrant fictions in their courses for preservice English teachers. Kate's course was a 3-credit-hour Multicultural Literature course for preservice English teachers (undergraduate and graduate). Some students chose to take the course as an optional elective, while others enrolled as a required component of their teaching certification. Of the students, 24 were White (16 of whom were female), 3 were Latina, and 1 was an African American female. While taking the course, undergraduate students were preparing for a 10-week teaching internship that would be completed that spring.

The Multicultural Literature course was designed to help teachers gain an understanding of at least eight pieces of literature written by diverse authors for teaching in the 6–12 English classroom. Kate adapted the curriculum to include larger discussions about culture and race in the English classroom, so each text was assigned with one or two additional articles to complicate students' thinking about the text. Using a reading workshop framework (Atwell, 1998), class discussions were led and guided by students who conferenced with Kate prior to the classroom discussions. At the end of the course, each student created two unit plans using two books discussed in class.

Brandon's course was Methods in Teaching English Language Arts, a required 4-credit-hour course for preservice, undergraduate students and credential-seeking graduate students. This was his first time teaching the course. Students roughly split their time between classes in a university setting and observing and participating as teachers in field placements in local schools. Historically, the course focused on writing instruction, but Brandon, like Kate, tried to take a

broader and more critical approach by joining literature, writing, and grammar pedagogy with conversations about race, culture, and identity. He hoped these conversations would prepare students for observing and teaching in diverse classrooms that same semester.

Sixteen (of 17) students in Brandon's course were White females, and one was a White male. Four students were credential-seeking graduate students. The remaining 13 were undergraduate juniors. Along with readings on teaching literature, writing, and grammar, the course featured readings about culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010), Whiteness, the potential cultural and class disconnects between (White) teachers and students (of color), immigrant education, and teaching diverse students across multiple lines of difference—race, gender, sexuality, class, and place. Specific readings, assignments, and student responses from both courses are discussed in the next section.

The data sources for this study consisted of reflective teaching journals and collections of student work, including formative writing assignments and summative unit designs. Both authors kept reflective teaching journals where they reacted to and interpreted class sessions relative to course objectives. While not initially written for data collection, the reflective journal served the analysis by providing support (or refutation) for data gathered directly from written student work. The teaching journals also helped the authors reconstruct the general trajectory of what transpired in the course at its conclusion.

To interpret the collected data—student journals and unit designs—the authors employed methods

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from the humanities (Blau, 2003). Reading and rereading were the primary activities that preceded and aided interpretation. Through rereading and interpretation, the authors constructed thematic statements based on the data. The authors noted, with each iteration of interpretation, areas of confidence and potential confusion regarding the meaning and significance of the journals and unit designs. Being explicit about areas of confusion provided focus when rereading and analyzing the data.

Instructional Possibilities

In both classes, texts featuring underrepresented US immigrant groups helped decenter students' assumptions about multicultural literature and scaffold more difficult discussions about culture, representation, and reader positionality in the classroom. In the sections below, the authors highlight specific pedagogical practices used to teach the texts; they also reflect on the possibilities and challenges of teaching *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* and *American Born Chinese* with preservice English teachers.

Examining Race and Representation

The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf and *American Born Chinese* served as important texts in prompting thoughtful discussions about race and representation in the English classroom. In both classes, students entered with tangible and perceived hesitations around the topic of race in schools (e.g., "We're all the same—why do we have to keep talking about race?"). However, both authors found that by stepping outside of the students' Black/White racial binary (Gee & Green, 1998; Martinez, 1997) to examine the historical and social construction of race, students were more comfortable exploring this topic (Figueroa, 2012; Frankenberg, 1997; Sharp & Wade, 2011) and the role race and ethnicity play in the English classroom (Locke & Cleary, 2011). For example, before reading *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, Kate assigned excerpts from Shaheen's (2001) *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Villifies a People*, a text that critiques Hollywood representations of Arabs, along with Baker's (2002) "Flying while Arab: Racial Profiling and Air Travel Security." In both texts, students were introduced to the social construction of race and to critiques of dominant media representations of Arabs. By reading these

texts before reading *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, students were better able to understand Khadra's experiences and contrast the representations discussed by Shaheen and Baker with descriptions of Khadra and her family (referred to by the characters' names, relationship [sister, brother, mother, friend], "Syrian," "olive," "covered," "hijabi").

For example, while reading Shaheen's text, Kate's students engaged in a critical reading of Disney's cartoon film, *Aladdin* (Clements & Musker, 1992). For many students, by closely rewatching a childhood favorite film in partnership with Shaheen's critique of the Orientalist discourses of Middle Eastern "violence" and "sexual fantasy" (Said, 1985), they better understood Shaheen's critiques and became critical readers of Arab representations. Students often problematized the term "Arab" and sought to explore the ethnic and social diversity among regions (like Syria) and descriptors that might be more appropriate (e.g., Syrian, Syrian Arab, Syriac Arameans, Syrian Kurd, Syriacs, Armenians) (Kabbani & Kamel, 2007). This shift is reflected in a representative quote from one student's journal: "I had no idea how Arabs had been racialized prior to 9/11. By watching *Aladdin* and reading Shaheen, I was able to see how Arabs have been historically depicted as overly violent, religiously fanatic, and often sexualized in contrast to the Western world. This awareness is going to help me be more thoughtful in selecting books that feature diverse Arab characters. I don't want to reaffirm Orientalist stereotypes."

In *American Born Chinese*, there is a character named Chin-Kee, Danny's cousin, who embodies every exaggerated stereotype of Asians and Asian Americans. He speaks with a thick accent and excels at martial arts and academics. Danny (a transformed Jin Wang, the protagonist) is mortified when Chin-Kee comes to visit him in America, fearing his cousin will ruin any chance he has of fitting in at his new school. In Brandon's course, he asked students to keep pedagogical reading journals to note their reactions as readers and to document emerging ideas for teaching the novel.

In their journals, students readily noticed the pedagogical potential of Chin-Kee and Danny's relationship. Many students initially expressed fear and reluctance at teaching the novel because Chin-Kee's character, an excessive stereotype, might be offensive. However, in writing through their evolving perspec-

tives, these same students began to understand his function within the story—Chin-Kee is a construction of the “sordid fantasies” (McCarthy, 1998; Trier, 2005) of the White imagination. Students observed that Chin-Kee serves a tragically comedic function, “a mirror image of the stereotypes [W]hite people be-

lieve about Asian people” (student journal). Another student noted, “Some of the ridiculous, cartoonish instances in the novel help bring to light how ridiculous some aspects of racism [. . .] can be in regards to people who are not ‘[W]hite middle class’” (student journal). Many noted a discomfort at reading the

Additional Immigrant Fictions

Al-Maria, S. (2012). *The Girl Who Fell to Earth*. HarperCollins.

Sophia Al-Maria’s The Girl Who Fell to Earth is a coming-of-age memoir that highlights Al-Maria’s experiences as the daughter of an American mother and a Bedouin father, growing up in both American and Gulf cultures. Readers have the pleasure of watching Al-Maria try to find her place within these two worlds.

Chehade, T. S. (2010). *Loom: A Novel*. Syracuse University Press.

Thérèse Soukar Chehade’s novel, Loom, features a nuanced portrait of the Lebanese Farrah family living in the Northeast. While waiting for Eva, a cousin, to arrive from Lebanon, we gain insight into the complex responses each family member has in connection with their emigration from the Lebanon to the United States. In their isolation, they are drawn together by a neighbor, Loom, who helps them foster connectedness in their lives.

Jarrar, R. (2008). *A Map of Home*. Other Press, LLC.

Nidali is a rebellious teenage girl growing up in Boston in the 1970s with an Egyptian-Greek mother and a Palestinian father. After the Iraqi invasion, Nidali’s family is forced to move to Egypt and then Texas. Meanwhile, Nidali grows up and experiences typical adolescent tensions—parental expectations, volatile friendships, sensuality, and first love.

H. Y. Kiyama (1999). *The Four Immigrants Manga: A Japanese Experience in San Francisco, 1904–1924* (F. L. Schodt, Trans.). Stone Bridge.

This partly autobiographical comic features the experiences of four Japanese immigrants in San Francisco over a 20-year period at the turn of the century. It would be valuable for teachers who want to explore multimodal and multilingual genres of fiction and the importance of understanding social and historical context when reading fiction.

Kwot, J. (2010). *Girl in Translation*. Riverhead.

Kwot tells the story of a Chinese girl (Kimberly) and her mother who emigrate from Hong Kong to Brooklyn. They live in poverty and work together in a Chinatown garment factory. In addition to intense labor, Kimberly negotiates life at school, a language barrier, young love, and bearing responsibility (through education) of the financial future of her family. Kwot’s novel would be useful in the classroom when teachers and students want to explore the complexities of adolescent identity as influenced by language, class, family, and place.

Tan, S. (2007). *The Arrival*. Authur A. Levine.

This wordless graphic novel tells the story of a man who leaves home for a strange (and fantastic) land to prepare a new home for his family. This text would help students understand and use visual literacy skills; it would also facilitate immersion in the story world—the world of the immigrant in this case—in a way that a regular codex might not be able to.

Chin-Kee passages but recognized that the purpose of this discomfort was for (White) readers to examine “their construction of the world and of race” and to turn the discomfort “into different ways of seeing the world and others” (student journal).

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The pedagogical reading journal was an important thinking space for White students to articulate their hesitations in teaching the novel and, eventually, to understand that Chin-Kee is not representing “the truth” of Asian immigrants but is a caricature and critique of how Whiteness reads and positions otherness in the world. In both courses, students engaged in difficult spoken and written conversations to understand how race is “a human production that constitutes an integral part of an ever-changing social meaning-making system” (López, 2003).

Whiteness and Positionality

The literary texts and accompanying readings helped these predominantly White students understand and complicate their positionality and subjectivity without fear of feeling “racist.” As Solomon, Portelli, Daniel, and Campbell (2005) explain, the study of Whiteness in preservice teacher education “seeks to have teachers and teacher candidates examine their overall understanding of their racial identity; [reflect on] the ideologies with which they enter the classroom; [and] explore the impact of those ideologies on their teaching practices and interactions with students” (p. 149). By introducing the social construction of race in the context of two books featuring Arab and Asian protagonists, the students seemed less defensive than in previous years and were more willing to discuss how their perspectives (and their future students’ perspectives) informed their readings of the texts. This allowed both classes to have candid conversations about White privilege (DiAngelo, 2011; Frankenberg, 1997; López, 2003), the discourses that perpetuate it,

and its impact on one’s reading of the world.

To prepare to read *American Born Chinese* and to observe and teach in diverse field placements, Brandon used a “silent conversation” activity to give students a safe place to write about and later discuss race, Whiteness, and privilege. The course readings grounding the activity were Gloria Ladson-Billings’s (1995) “But That Is Just Good Teaching!”—a classic piece defining and defending culturally responsive pedagogy—and Smiley and Helfenbein’s (2011) “Becoming Teachers: The Payne Effect.” This second article documents how Ruby Payne’s book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (1996), affected the attitudes and expectations of White preservice teachers working with students of color in urban settings. Smiley and Helfenbein suggest that Payne’s framework contributed to the teachers’ deficit thinking and messiah complexes (White teacher as savior) when imagining and working with urban students.

During Brandon’s class, students responded to quotes from both readings by writing anonymously on giant yellow sticky paper posted around the room. Each station contained a provocation from the reading that illustrated a central concept about culturally relevant pedagogy and/or White teacher attitudes about urban students of color. Brandon’s students were skeptical of Ruby Payne’s framework (as presented in the article) and critiqued the stereotypes used by preservice teachers in Smiley and Helfenbein’s (2011) study to describe urban students of color—wild, unpredictable, hungry, and in need of love and support. Brandon’s students recognized that these attitudes positioned White teachers as saviors and emptied urban and diverse communities of dignity. In one “silent conversation,” a student noted that it is important to name these stereotypes as “racial and class mythology,” but that same student also realized that “had it not been for reading these articles, we might think the same thing” (Silent Conversation Texts). In this way, students were positioning themselves as White and privileged, and finding it problematic as a lens through which to read the world and others.

Regarding Ladson-Billings’s (1995) injunction to cultivate sociopolitical consciousness, critique, and action within and through the classroom, students were generally enthusiastic but unable to see how they are implicated in this critical project. They agreed that students should be critical thinkers about the world

around them, understand the history of the present and the status quo, and cultivate a sense of care for their communities. However, few, if any, of the students were able to name themselves as privileged beneficiaries of the current sociopolitical structure. Judging from their written and spoken comments, only one student made an explicit connection that awakening sociopolitical consciousness in students and disrupting the status quo might also disrupt systems of privilege and power that they benefit from and help sustain. This same student notes that teaching critically will get you noticed for “all the wrong reasons”: “I love the idea of fostering critical thinking early on. It seems useful to give students the ability to form opinions and judgments, but then we must be aware that we are earning the label of ‘that liberal left-wing teacher’ when students begin questioning their parents and values they were brought up to have.” This comment was one example of the “white talk” (Trainor, 2005) students employed that represented (sometimes subtle) disagreement, misgiving, or resistance to the idea that teachers should help students understand and critique institutions that reproduce inequality and inhibit human growth.

While reading *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, students in Kate’s course examined the social construction of Whiteness through study of the racial categorization of Arabs. To help facilitate the discussion, students read excerpts from Gualtieri’s (2009) *Between Arab and White: Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian American Diaspora*, which highlights the racial classification and reclassification of early Syrian-Arab immigrants. This classification allowed students to have conversations about the privileges historically awarded to White people (Rothenberg, 2004) and how those privileges continue to influence the experience of White individuals (McIntosh, 1988). For example, a representative quote from the students’ reading journals was:

It was very interesting to read about how Whiteness has been defined and redefined over history. To see that Arabs were originally defined as non-White, but were able to become White over time, and now want to be identified as non-White for discrimination services was fascinating. To also see how Whiteness has explicitly been aligned with specific legal and economic privileges allows me to better understand how White privilege continues to function today. While I still don’t know what to do about this, I guess

understanding is a step in the right direction. . . .

By discussing the history of Whiteness and the socially constructed nature of Whiteness/race in conversation with “Arab-ness,” students were able to make Whiteness more visible and begin thinking about how this privilege frames their reading and discussion of texts with protagonists of color.

Complicating Race through Hybridization and Hyphenation

Additionally, both graphic novels helped students complicate constructions of race through hybridization. Bhabha (1994) defines hybridity as a concept that challenges cultural essentialism, or “the belief in invariable and fixed properties which define the ‘whatness’ of a given entity” (Fuss, 1991, p. xi), by emphasizing the multiple and liminal nature of cultural identity. Hyphenated identities (often written as Arab-American, Asian-American) often represent hybridization and emphasize the fluid and unstable nature of cultural identity and markers. Caglar (1997)

writes that “bearers of hyphenated identities . . . highlight the inadequacy of commonsense assumptions about culture as a self-contained, bounded and unified construct” (p. 169). Instead, hyphenated identities “propose a fluid, and therefore a figuratively hyphenated, identity that is open to variation at both the group (e.g., racial, ethnic, linguistic, and religious) and the individual levels” (Sirin & Fine, 2008, p. 5).

In *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, Kahf highlights the variation of within-group identities among a group of Arab American and Muslim American characters by displaying the differing perceptions and behavior among first- and second-generation Muslim immigrants in Indianapolis. After reading these descriptions, Kate asked students to read excerpts from Sirin and Fine’s (2008) *Muslim American Youth: Understanding Hyphenated Identities through Multiple*

It was very interesting to read about how Whiteness has been defined and redefined over history. . . . [it] allows [the reader] to better understand how White privilege continues to function today.

Methods. By highlighting and exploring the hybrid and hyphenated identities of the protagonist (Arab/Syrian/Muslim and American), the students complicated labels like “Arab American” or “Muslim” to recognize the enormous diversity within these categories (i.e., national, regional, and ethnic diversity). In a representative quote, a student expressed: “After reading *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, I wonder if ‘Arab American’ is an appropriate term to describe Khadra. . . . Is Syrian or Syrian American more appropriate? In what way does referring to her as ‘Arab American’ reinforce some of the same homogenization that we’ve been problematizing?” In Kate’s course, this scaffolded later conversations regarding the diversity among African American and Latino/a immigrant students. In Brandon’s course, ideas of hybridity and hyphenated identities served as a reminder for his future teachers to see race, class, and gender as both structure and performance, and students as creative actors who are shaped by these identity categories but not fixed by them.

Complications

Teaching *American Born Chinese* and *Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* facilitated critical conversations about race, privilege, and difference, especially as these affect the work of English teachers. However, complications arose that neither author anticipated. Below, the authors explain these complications to reflect on their own teaching and offer a word of caution for teachers and teacher educators planning similar work in classrooms.

“Representative” Literature and the “Model Minority”

Both classes made an important move in understanding how race and ethnicity are socially constructed and the importance of representing diverse voices; however, students often regarded the two novels as “representative” of the Asian American and/or Arab American experience. For example, students in the Multicultural Literature class would often reference Khadra’s experience as “the Arab American experience” as opposed to one fictional representation of a Syrian immigrant girl growing up in Indianapolis. While the authors encouraged students to investigate and read other texts written by Asian American or

Arab American authors, they did not require it. In future classes, they hope to include a variety of texts by authors who identify as Asian American and Arab American to complicate the students’ singular attribution of experience.

Over the course of teaching these texts, Brandon and Kate also recognized that the students’ positive experiences discussing race might have been partially attributed to the “model minority” status of both Asian and Arab immigrant identities. “Model minority,” a term that first appeared in William Peterson’s *New York Times* article “Success Story, Japanese American Style” (1966) to praise Japanese Americans, is often used to describe Asian Americans’ abilities to thrive ostensibly on their own (Wu, 2002). The “model minority” status has been extended to Arab immigrants as well, since Arabs have historically achieved a significant amount of social and economic success in the United States. Brandon and Kate continue to recognize the importance of US immigrant fictions to scaffold understanding of race and representation; as indicated earlier, US immigrant fictions can also be used as a means to disrupt the Black/White racial binary and as a conduit to foster critical discussions about race and representation with texts that feature Latino/a and African American characters.

As suggested by classroom discussion and written assignments, students responded positively to instruction by taking up a critical stance on issues of race, positionality, privilege, and power. However, Kate and Brandon were disappointed with the final unit plans students produced and submitted. Many unit plans for both novels lacked the critical and potentially transformative edge suggested by their “rough-draft thinking” as displayed in class discussion and written materials. In what follows, Brandon briefly elaborates on the missing elements from students’ final assignments and reflects on the pedagogical changes that could be made to facilitate student production of critical and usable teaching materials.

Supporting Student Production of Critical Teaching Materials

For the final units, in addition to detailed lesson plans and support materials, Brandon asked students to articulate their goals and aims for the units, the course readings that influenced their thinking, and their rationale for how their units were culturally responsive to

the needs of diverse students. Commonly referenced aims were skill-based and included developing English language arts disciplinary skills, familiarizing students with unknown literary genres and multimodal expression, and incorporating digital media into reading and writing instruction. Less frequently referenced aims included increasing “appreciation of other cultures” and helping students feel “content and happy with their identity.” Students did mention the potential of discussing stereotypes, bullying, and prejudice, but these issues were framed in terms of what “bad” individuals do to each other; students did not mention how stereotypes and racism function in a network and system of power relations. They did not seem aware that institutions and shared objects of culture (narratives, media) potentially function to circulate power relations in ways that keep dominant discourses—including how race and race relations are constructed—in place (Gee, 1998). Students’ final units simplified the more complicated thinking about Whiteness and positionality (discussed above) produced in many of their reading journals. Thinking about positionality, how one is raced, classed, gendered, and the resulting effects on how one reads the world was absent from their thinking and teaching plans. Brandon recognized that, in Freire’s (1993) terms, he could have done more to help his students’ critical reading of the world and to design curriculum materials that facilitate this kind of work and perspective.

McGee (2011) and Enciso (2011) report mostly successful attempts at critical pedagogy with students but, at key classroom moments when critical conversations could have been opened up, both succumbed to the perceived demands of ELA disciplinary concerns or testing preparation—a sense of “this is important but we need to move on.” Brandon recognizes that he and his students could have been similarly preoccupied with learning how to fulfill Common Core State Standards requirements and internal program evaluation measures. It is possible that his students were overwhelmed by the information and standards one must cover as a teacher—and so literacy transformed from a critical and empowering enterprise to a mostly technical and cognitive skill (Botzakis, Burns, & Hall, 2014).

To facilitate the transfer of student thinking as seen in their journals to their curriculum designs, it

would be important to show students exemplar units and activities for *American Born Chinese*, or other similar texts that facilitate critical conversations about race, immigration, Whiteness, positionality, and power (see, for example, Schieble, 2014). Reading this kind of work could serve as a bridge between students’ rough-draft thinking and tentative pedagogical design (as seen in their pedagogical reading journals) and final curriculum units. While

the authors recognize the changes that need to be made within their courses, it is also important to note that facilitating critical awareness and perspectives is long-term work that exceeds what is possible for one course. Curriculum changes at the program level need to be made to help students understand and plan for critical pedagogical work in their future classrooms.

Conclusion

Reflections on teaching immigrant fictions offer readers a glimpse into the critical conversations that are possible when using these texts. These critical conversations about identity, belonging, racism, and “Americanness” are crucial for teacher preparation programs and within secondary schools. The more standardized, technical, and “placeless” teaching becomes—through accountability, testing regimes, and prepackaged curricula—the more teachers risk ignoring the needs, identities, and struggles of students. The two texts highlighted here offer just two examples of a critical conversation with future teachers and students about race, identity, and belonging. As suggested in the preceding pages, US immigrant fictions offer teachers and students potential paths for discussing race and White privilege in ways that acknowledge the complex lives of students of color. US immigrant fictions offer English teachers culturally responsive tools to create educational spaces that, when necessary, critique inequality and unearned privilege while promoting equity inside and outside the classroom.

Reflections on teaching immigrant fictions offer readers a glimpse into the critical conversations that are possible when using these texts.

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