

WINTER 2015

VOLUME 42, ISSUE 2

---

T ♦ H ♦ E  
**ALAN**  
**REVIEW**

---

ASSEMBLY ON LITERATURE  
FOR ADOLESCENTS

OF THE NATIONAL COUNCIL  
OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

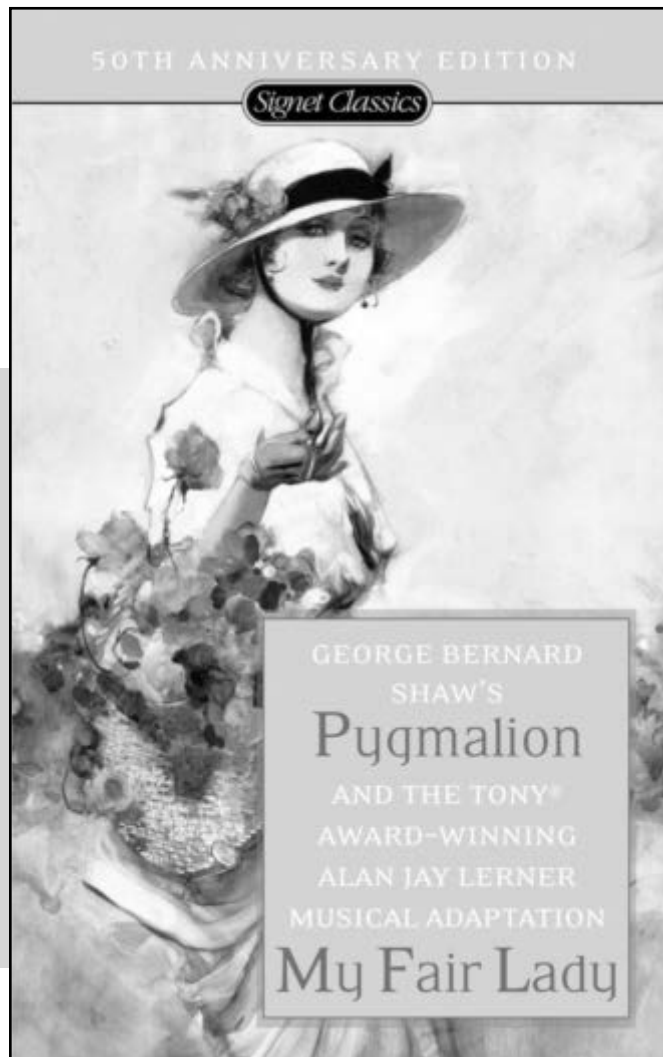
*Signet Classics*

*Nineteenth Annual*  
**STUDENT SCHOLARSHIP  
ESSAY CONTEST**

**\$5,000**

IN SCHOLARSHIPS  
FOR JUNIORS  
AND SENIORS

Have your students write an essay  
on *Pygmalion* and *My Fair Lady*  
for the opportunity to win a  
\$1,000 SCHOLARSHIP  
and a complete Signet Classics  
library for your high school.



visit [www.penguin.com/scessay](http://www.penguin.com/scessay)

FOR COMPLETE RULES, PREVIOUS WINNERS AND ESSAYS, AND ADDITIONAL INFORMATION



## Join the National Council of Teachers of English

Just as you do your best for your students, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) is doing its best to support you. NCTE is *the* professional organization for English language arts teachers.

**Join** NCTE to play a role in **improving the conditions for teaching and learning** for all students.

**Join** to gain access to creative ideas that will **inspire engaged readers, persuasive writers, and incisive thinkers.**

**Join** us to ensure that literacy teachers play a leading role in designing and selecting teaching materials and assessments that are appropriate for all students.

**Join** to **protect yourself and your teacher and librarian colleagues from censorship challenges.**

**Join** so that English language arts teachers are **respected as professionals and empowered to use their judgment to make decisions that matter.**

Join now and  
**save up to 30%**  
on NCTE books and  
resources!

**NCTE**

Join today at [www.ncte.org/join](http://www.ncte.org/join)

## ALAN Membership

Please enroll me as a member of the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the National Council of Teachers of English (ALAN). I understand that individual membership includes voting rights and a one-year subscription to *The ALAN Review*. Institutional membership includes a one-year subscription to *The ALAN Review* but no voting rights.

**PLEASE SELECT TYPE AND STATUS:**

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| Type:   | Status:                                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Individual (\$30/year*)    | <input type="checkbox"/> New membership |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Institutional (\$50/year*) | <input type="checkbox"/> Renewal        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Student (\$10.00/year*)    |   |
- \*International postage - add \$12 per year, US funds.

**BEST!** Individual and Institutional members may choose multi-year membership (up to 3 years).

I wish to join for \_\_\_\_\_ years; total \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Institution \_\_\_\_\_

Home/Work (circle one) Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_

Home  Work  Cell Phone \_\_\_\_\_ (In the event of a problem, failure to provide contact information may delay the renewal or initiation of your membership and *ALAN Review* subscription)

**PLEASE SELECT POSITION AND LEVEL:**

- |                                    |  |
|------------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher   | <input type="checkbox"/> Elementary          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Librarian | <input type="checkbox"/> Middle/Intermediate |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Publisher | <input type="checkbox"/> High School         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Author    | <input type="checkbox"/> College/University  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> OTHER     | <input type="checkbox"/> OTHER               |

Make checks payable to ALAN and mail to:

ALAN Membership  
P.O. Box 234  
Campbell, OH 44405-0234

Or pay by credit card and mail by USPS, or email to  
margeford@gmail.com, or Fax to Marge Ford at 330-755-7808

Address for credit card, if different than above: \_\_\_\_\_

**CHECK ONE**

- Check enclosed  
 Charge my MasterCard  
 Charge my VISA  
 Charge my Discover  
 Charge my American Express

Account No. \_\_\_\_\_ (security code—3 digits on back) \_\_\_\_\_

Expiration Date \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_ \$ \_\_\_\_\_ (amount to be charged)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Your signature)

Volume 42

Number 2

Winter 2015



## Race Matters: The Presence and Representation of Authors and Characters of Color in YA Literature

<p>Wendy Glenn Ricki Ginsberg Danielle King</p>	<p><b>From the Editors</b></p> <p><b>Call for Manuscripts</b></p>	<p>4</p>
<p>Coe Booth, Matt de la Peña, Walter Dean Myers, Cynthia Leitich Smith, Gene Luen Yang</p>	<p><b>Race Matters:</b> A Collaborative Conversation</p>	<p>8</p>
<p>Wanda M. Brooks Jonda C. McNair</p>	<p><b>Expanding the Canon:</b> Classic African American Young Adult Literature</p>	<p>15</p>
<p>Kristine Gritter, Xu Bian, Kristi Kanehen</p>	<p><b>Contextualizing Metaphors of Literacy in Young Adult Literature (2000–2013)</b></p>	<p>24</p>
<p>Antero Garcia Marcelle Haddix</p>	<p><b>Reading YA with “Dark Brown Skin”:</b> Race, Community, and Rue’s Uprising</p>	<p>37</p>
<p>Emily Wender</p>	<p><b>Felt Tensions:</b> Preservice Teachers Read Sherman Alexie’s <i>An Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian</i></p>	<p>45</p>
<p>Chonika Coleman-King Susan L. Groenke</p>	<p><b>Enhancing Antiracist Teacher Education:</b> Critical Witnessing through Pairing YA Literature and Adult Nonfiction</p>	<p>57</p>
<p>Brandon Sams Kate R. Allman</p>	<p><b>Complicating Race:</b> Representation and Resistance Using Arab and Asian American Immigrant Fictions</p>	<p>68</p>
<p>E. Sybil Durand</p>	<p><b>Understanding Diversity in a Global Context:</b> Preservice Teachers’ Encounters with Postcolonial Young Adult Literature</p>	<p>80</p>
<p>Patricia Hauschildt</p>	<p><b>“I loved this book, even though . . .”:</b> Reading International Young Adult Literature</p>	<p>91</p>
<p>Rénard B. Harris S.d. Collins</p>	<p><b>BOOK IN REVIEW: A TEACHING GUIDE</b> <b>Seriously, Can We Talk Laugh about Race?</b> Voices from <i>Open Mic</i></p>	<p>103</p>

Teri S. Lesesne Karin Perry James Bucky Carter	<b>RIGHT TO READ Asking Questions, Seeking Answers, Challenging Assumptions</b>	109
Susan L. Groenke Judson Laughter	<b>LAYERED LITERACIES Reading, Race, and Responsibility</b>	114
Lisa Yee	<b>A Rambling Rant about Race and Writing</b>	119

## Call for Manuscripts

### Submitting a Manuscript:

Manuscript submission guidelines are available on p. 2 of this issue and on our website at <http://www.alan-ya.org/page/alan-review-author-guidelines>.

### Winter 2016: Adolescence and Adolescents: Defining the Culture of Youth

How we conceive of adolescence influences our perception of adolescents. Through a biological lens, we might envision adolescence as an inevitable stage of life in which raging hormones determine behavior. Through a coming-of-age lens, adolescence might be defined by individual self-discovery and attainment of adult norms. Through a sociocultural lens, adolescence might be seen as a socially mediated practice created and shifted by societal expectations and influences. Taken together, these perspectives offer sophisticated and diverse means of defining the culture of youth.

In this issue, we invite you to consider how young adult titles (and those who write, teach, and promote them) might offer, challenge, confirm, or critique conceptions of adolescents or adolescence. How do authors present the young people they describe? How do readers respond to these representations? How do educators envision the young people in their care—and how does this vision influence how they care for them? How might stories help readers navigate adolescence (as defined through any lens) and work through the complexity expressed by David Levithan and John Green: “My face seems too square and my eyes too big, like I’m perpetually surprised, but there’s nothing wrong with me that I can fix” (*Will Grayson, Will Grayson*, 2010)?

As always, we also welcome submissions focused on any aspect of young adult literature not directly connected to this theme. All submissions may be sent to [alan-review@uconn.edu](mailto:alan-review@uconn.edu) prior to **July 1, 2015**.

### Summer 2016: Mediating Media in a Digital Age

Today’s young adult readers access and generate texts in myriad forms. Through multimedia platforms, television and film adaptations, fan fiction, and social media, they engage with stories in ways that extend beyond the originals. These opportunities for connection are rich in potential and complication. Do media enrich our interactions with others and our world—or is there a falseness in this seeming linkage? Consider the perspective of Rainbow Rowell’s narrator: “There are other people on the Internet. It’s awesome. You get all the benefits of ‘other people’ without the body odor and the eye contact” (*Fangirl*). We wonder if all readers are inspired by techie texts or if some, in fact, imagine life as “an analog girl, living in a digital world” (*American Gods*).

For this issue, we encourage you to ponder and explore the ways in which we mediate media: How do you foster innovative engagement with media in your professional setting? What are the challenges of teaching and learning in the digital age, and how might they be mediated? How do digital communities invite and/or exclude young people today? What role does/can YA literature play in successfully navigating life in the “digital age”?

As always, we also welcome submissions focused on any aspect of young adult literature not directly connected to this theme. All submissions may be sent to [alan-review@uconn.edu](mailto:alan-review@uconn.edu) prior to **November 1, 2015**.

**Editor** **Wendy Glenn**  
wendy.glenn@uconn.edu  
University of Connecticut

**Assistant Editors** **Ricki Ginsberg**  
ricki.ginsberg@uconn.edu  
University of Connecticut

**Danielle King**  
danielle.king@uconn.edu  
University of Connecticut

#### Editorial Review Board

Mary Arnold, *Cuyahoga County Public Library*

Jacqueline Bach, *Louisiana State University*

Katherine Bell, *Wilfrid Laurier University*

April Brannon, *Louisiana State University*

Joni Richards Bodart, *San Jose State University*

Jean Boreen, *Northern Arizona University*

April Brannon, *California State University, Fullerton*

Kathy Brashears, *Tennessee Tech University*

Alan Brown, *Wake Forest University*

Bill Broz, *University of Texas-Pan American*

Jennifer Buehler, *Saint Louis University*

Tara Campbell, *Georgia State University*

James Bucky Carter, *Washington State University*

James S. Chisholm, *University of Louisville*

Melissa Comer, *Tennessee Tech University*

Sean Connors, *University of Arkansas*

Chris Crowe, *Brigham Young University*

Jennifer Dail, *Kennesaw State University*

Janine Darragh, *University of Idaho*

Jennifer Denmon, *University of South Florida*

Maggie Dorsey, *Oxford Academy*

Katie S. Dredger, *James Madison University*

Kevin Dupre, *Athens State University*

E. Sybil Durand, *Arizona State University*

Brooke Eisenbach, *Florida Virtual School and University of South Florida*

Toby Emert, *Agnes Scott College*

Judith Franzak, *New Mexico State University*

Maggie Freeburn, *Formerly University of Colorado Denver*

Bryan Gillis, *Kennesaw State University*

Mary Louise Gomez, *University of Wisconsin-Madison*

Eimilé Máiréad Green, *Maumee Valley Country Day School*

Robin D. Groce, *Appalachian State University*

Kay Haas, *Johnson County Community College*

Patricia M. Hauschildt, *Youngstown State University*

Judith Hayn, *University of Arkansas at Little Rock*

Lisa A. Hazlett, *University of South Dakota*

Kathy Headley, *Clemson University*

Sarah K. Herz, *Westport Public Schools*

Crag Hill, *University of Oklahoma*

KaaVonnia Hinton, *Old Dominion University*

Teri Holbrook, *Georgia State University*

Peggy F. (Missy) Hopper, *Mississippi State University*

Melanie Hundley, *Vanderbilt University*

Angela Insenga, *University of West Georgia*

Angie Beumer Johnson, *Wright State University*

Jeffrey Kaplan, *University of Central Florida, Orlando*

Joan F. Kaywell, *University of South Florida*

Brian Kelley, *Fordham University*

Kathryn Kelly, *Radford University*

Dixie Keyes, *Arkansas State University*

Melanie Koss, *Northern Illinois University*

Sean Kottke, *Michigan Department of Education*

Desi Krell, *University of Florida*

Courtney M. Krieger, *Western Heights Middle School and Hillsdale College*

Nai-Hua Kuo, *Purdue University*

Teri Lesesne, *Sam Houston State University*

Mark Letcher, *Purdue University, Calumet*

Marilyn Lorch, *Northern Illinois University*

Joellen Maples, *St. John Fisher College*

Katherine Mason, *Wichita State University*

Sharon L. McElmeel, *University of Wisconsin-Stout*

SJ Miller, *University of Colorado, Boulder*

J. Bradley Minnick, *University of Arkansas at Little Rock*

John Noell Moore, *The College of William and Mary*

Shannon R. Mortimore-Smith, *Shippensburg University*

Kellee Moye, *Hunter's Creek Middle School*

Alleen Nilsen, *Arizona State University*

Elaine J. O'Quinn, *Appalachian State University*

Mary Ellen Oslick, *University of Central Arkansas*

Jon Ostenson, *Brigham Young University*

Ruchelle Owens, *University of South Florida and Tomlin Middle School*

Linda T. Parsons, *The Ohio State University, Marion*

Sue Christian Parsons, *Oklahoma State University*

Emily Pendergrass, *Vanderbilt University*

Karin Perry, *Sam Houston State University*

Daria Plumb, *Riverside Academy*

June Pulliam, *Louisiana State University*

Delia Regan, *East Hampton Middle School*

Kia Jane Richmond, *Northern Michigan University*

René Saldaña, Jr., *Texas Tech University*

Sophia Sariagianides, *Westfield State University*

Lisa Scherff, *Estero High School*

Renita Schmidt, *The University of Iowa*

Kelly Shea, *Manchester High School*

Joanna Simpson, *Kennesaw State University*

Tiffany Smith, *E. O. Smith High School*

Anna O. Soter, *The Ohio State University*

Kat Spradlin, *Godby High School*

Julie Stepp, *Tennessee Tech University*

Renee Stites, *Saint Louis University*

Lois T. Stover, *Marymount University*

Terri Suico, *Saint Mary's College*

Alan B. Teasley, *Duke University*

Mary Ann Tighe, *Troy University*

Eli Tucker-Raymond, *TERC*

Anete Vasquez, *Kennesaw State University*

Barbara A. Ward, *Washington State University*

Mary Warner, *San Jose State University*

Julie Warner, *Armstrong Atlantic State University*

Elizabeth Watts, *Broward County Public Schools*

Susan Weinstein, *Louisiana State University*

Mamey Welmers, *Tortolita Middle School*

Nance Wilson, *SUNY Cortland*

Shelbie Witte, *Florida State University*

Jillian Zabrocky, *Ridgefield Public Schools*

Connie S. Zitlow, *Ohio Wesleyan University*

## Instructions for Authors

**ABOUT THE ALAN REVIEW.** *The ALAN Review* (TAR; ISSN 0882-2840 [Print], ISSN 1547-741X [Online]) publishes articles that explore, examine, critique, and advocate for literature for young adults and the teaching of that literature. Published pieces include, but are not limited to, research studies, papers presented at professional meetings, surveys of the literature, critiques of the literature, articles about authors, comparative studies across genres and/or cultures, articles on ways to teach the literature to adolescents, and interviews with YA authors.

**AUDIENCE.** Many of the individual members of ALAN are classroom teachers of English in middle, junior, and senior high schools. Other readers include university faculty members in English and/or Education programs, researchers in the field of young adult literature, librarians, YA authors, publishers, reading teachers, and teachers in related content areas. ALAN has members in all 50 United States and a number of foreign countries.

**PREFERRED STYLE.** Manuscripts should usually be no longer than twenty double-spaced, typed pages, not including references. A manuscript submitted for consideration should deal specifically with literature for young adults and/or the teaching of that literature. It should have a clearly defined topic and be scholarly in content, as well as practical and useful to people working with and/or studying young adults and their literature. Research studies and papers should be treated as articles rather than formal reports. Stereotyping on the basis of sex, race, age, etc., should be avoided, as should gender-specific terms such as "chairman."

**MANUSCRIPT FORMAT.** Manuscripts should be double-spaced throughout, including quotations and bibliographies. The names of submitting authors should not appear anywhere in the manuscript. Short quotations, as permitted under "fair use" in the copyright law, must be carefully documented within the manuscript and in the bibliography. Longer quotations and complete poems or short stories must be accompanied by written permission from the copyright owner. YA author interviews should be accompanied by written permission for publication in TAR from the interviewed author(s). Interviewers should indicate to the author(s) that publication is subject to review of an editorial board. Original short tables and figures should be double-spaced and placed on separate sheets at the end of the manuscript. Notations should appear in the text indicating proper placement of tables and figures.

*The ALAN Review* uses the bibliographic style detailed in the *Publications Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA)*. Please adhere to that style when including in-text citations and preparing reference lists.

**SUBMITTING THE MANUSCRIPT.** Authors should submit manuscripts electronically to alan-review@uconn.edu. In the subject line, please write: ALAN Manuscript Submission. All manuscripts should be written using a recent version of Microsoft Word and use APA bibliographical format. Complete submissions include, as separate attachments, the following documents: 1) A manuscript without references to the author(s). 2) A title page with names, affiliations, mailing addresses, and 100–150-word professional biographies for each submitting author. (In the case of multiple authors, the author submitting the manuscript will serve as the primary contact unless stipulated otherwise.) 3) A brief statement that the article is original, has not been published previously in other journals and/or books, and is not a simultaneous submission.

**REVIEW PROCESS.** Each manuscript will receive a blind review by the editors and at least three members of the Editorial Review Board, unless the length, style, or content makes it inappropriate for publication. Usually, authors should expect to hear the results within eight weeks. Manuscripts are judged for the contribution made to the field of young adult literature and mission of *The ALAN Review*, scholarly rigor, and clarity of writing. Selection also depends on the manuscript's contribution to the overall balance of the journal.

**PUBLICATION OF ARTICLES.** *The ALAN Review* assumes that accepted manuscripts have not been published previously in any other journals and/or books, nor will they be published subsequently without permission of the editors. Should the author submit the manuscript to more than one publication, he/she should notify *The ALAN Review*. If a submitted or accepted manuscript is accepted by another publication prior to publication in *The ALAN Review*, the author should immediately withdraw the manuscript from publication in *The ALAN Review*.

Manuscripts that are accepted may be edited for clarity, accuracy, readability, and publication style. Upon publication, the author will receive two copies of *The ALAN Review* in which the article appears. Publication usually occurs within 18 months of acceptance.

**DEADLINES. Please observe these deadlines if you wish to have your article considered for a particular issue of *The ALAN Review*.**

**FALL (October) Issue Deadline:**

**MARCH 1**

**WINTER (March) Issue Deadline:**

**JULY 1**

**SUMMER (June) Issue Deadline:**

**NOVEMBER 1**

**Cover credit:** Cover photo by Ricki Ginsberg. © 2014. All rights reserved.



## From the Editors

Race Matters: The Presence and Representation of Authors and Characters of Color in YA Literature

“There’s really no such thing as the ‘voiceless.’  
There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.” (Arundhati Roy)

Statistics suggest that, by 2019, approximately 49% of students enrolled in US public schools will be Latina/o, Black, Asian/Pacific Island, or American Indian (Hussar & Bailey, 2011). However, the field has been increasingly criticized for not reflecting these demographics in the literature published for young adult readers. For readers of color, this can result in a sense of disconnect between lived reality and what is described on the page. For readers from the dominant culture, this can result in a limited perception of reality and affirmation of a singular way of knowing and doing and being. For all readers, exposure to a variety of ethnically unfamiliar literature can encourage critical reading of text and world, recognition of the limitations of depending upon mainstream depictions of people and their experiences, and the building of background knowledge and expansion of worldview.

In this issue, we share experiences, challenges, hesitations, and successes in using or promoting young adult literature that features characters and/or authors of color. We are invited into classrooms, libraries, and school communities to better understand the potential value and necessity of broadening the texts we use to capture the imaginations of all readers.

We are grateful to share Arnold Adoff’s powerful poem “of course . . .” as our opening piece because it reminds us that words can inspire revolution and

urges us to remember that “the noise of that/ story and the shout of that song/ must always be louder than the/ silence of the bullets and the/ silent deaths of grim despair.”

“Race Matters: A Collaborative Conversation” features a memorable written dialogue between several YA authors who have addressed explicitly issues of race in their presentations and writings: Coe Booth, Matt de la Peña, Walter Dean Myers, Cynthia Leitich Smith, and Gene Luen Yang.

In “Expanding the Canon: Classic African American Young Adult Literature,” Wanda M. Brooks and Jonda C. McNair examine the term “classic” and draw upon the expertise of highly regarded scholars and scholarship to define and discuss representative titles of classic African American texts intended for youth.

In their article, “Contextualizing Metaphors of Literacy in Young Adult Literature (2000–2013),” Kristine Gritter, Xu Bain, and Kristi Kanehen use Scribner’s literacy metaphors, as well as four of their own, to examine the literacy practices of adolescent and adult protagonists in recent award-winning literature. Their study leads to assertions about how literacy in important cultural texts is situated ideologically by gender and ethnicity.

In “Reading YA with ‘Dark Brown Skin’: Race, Community, and Rue’s Uprising,” Antero Garcia and Marcelle Haddix explore the relationship between



printed text and electronic forms to argue that trans-media and online fandom create rich ecologies and sites of connected learning tied to YAL that, in the context of race, can be both liberating and reifying of assumptions regarding racial identity. They explore, in particular, how YAL acts as a portal for critical civic learning about race in today's digital spaces.

Emily Wender ("Felt Tensions: Preservice Teachers Read Sherman Alexie's *An Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*"), Chonika Coleman-King and Susan L. Groenke ("Enhancing Antiracist Teacher Education: Critical Witnessing through Pairing YA Literature and Adult Nonfiction"), and Brandon Sams and Kate R. Allman ("Complicating Race: Representation and Resistance Using Arab and Asian American Immigrant Fictions") examine implications for using multicultural literature in the education of preservice teachers. Wender studies how dialogic journals might be used to motivate perspective taking in preservice teachers, allowing them to recognize and value tensions between their outlooks and those of the characters in Alexie's novel. Coleman-King and Groenke engage students in the "literary truth" of fiction paired with the "literary and literal truth" of nonfiction to encourage critical witnessing in their antiracist work with preservice teachers. And Brandon Sams and Kate R. Allman explore how immigrant fictions can serve as powerful texts for disrupting dominant constructions of race for preservice English teachers while simultaneously fostering discussion around the importance of culturally responsive literature.

E. Sybil Durand and Patricia Hauschildt extend the conversation beyond US borders. In "Understanding Diversity in a Global Context: Preservice Teachers' Encounters with Postcolonial Young Adult Literature," Durand draws from a conversation in which five preservice teachers discuss the novel *Now Is the Time for Running* (Williams, 2011) to argue that reading and discussing postcolonial literature in a book club setting can provide valuable critical insights for future teachers as they reflect on similar local and national issues and as they prepare to teach in culturally diverse classrooms. And in "'I loved this book, even though . . .': Reading International Young Adult Literature," Hauschildt describes her efforts to explore how her university students responded to international YAL, as readers and as future teachers, and compared their experiences with geographically unfamiliar texts

to reading YAL set in the United States.

We're proud to share the continued work of our columnists in this issue. "Book in Review: A Teaching Guide," written by S. d. Collins and Rénard Harris, presents "Seriously, Can We Talk Laugh about Race? Voices from *Open Mic*." Collins and Harris provide educators with teaching strategies for using *Open Mic: Riffs on Life between Cultures in Ten Voices* (Perkins, 2013), a collection of short stories written by various YA authors that explore what it means to grow up "between cultures."

Our Right to Read column, "Asking Questions, Seeking Answers, Challenging Assumptions," features Karin Perry and James Bucky Carter together with Teri Lesesne. Perry defines and considers the negative implications of gatekeeping practices that result in self-censorship and ultimately deny readers access. Carter examines race in comic books to challenge perceptions of readership and promote comics as a democratic medium.

Susan L. Groenke and Judson Laughter's Layered Literacies column "Reading, Race, and Responsibility" discusses and provides important resources to help teachers break the silence about race and reclaim their classrooms as the "public *raced* space[s]" they are.

We conclude this issue with Lisa Yee's "A Rambling Rant about Race and Writing" in which the YA author provides personal, candid, inspiring reflections on the *We Need Diverse Books* campaign and offers a call to action for educators, librarians, authors, and publishers.

As an additional resource for readers, we also want to give a shout-out to the Children's Book Council. The organization's Diversity Initiative "advocates for an inclusive and representative children's book publishing industry" (<http://www.cbcbooks.org/about/cbc-diversity-events/>). A related newsletter, "Diversity in the News," gathers and shares relevant happenings in children's books and diversity. You can read current and past issues (and subscribe) here: <http://www.cbcbooks.org/diversity-in-the-news-august-2014/#.VBxtl-dtliw>.

As you read the pieces featured in this issue, we encourage you to ponder Jacqueline Woodson's words, "Someday somebody's going to come along and knock this old fence down" (*The Other Side*, p. 32). What might you do to give that fence a nudge?

## References

- Hussar, W. J., & Bailey, T. M. (2011). *Projections of education statistics to 2019*. National Center for Education Statistics, 2011-017, US Department of Education. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2011017>.
- Roy, A. (2004, November). *Peace and the new corporate liberation theology*. Speech presented at the Sydney Peace Prize Lecture, University of Sydney, Australia. Retrieved from <http://www.smh.com.au/news/Opinion/Roys-full-speech/2004/11/04/1099362264349.html>.
- Woodson, J. (2001). *The other side* (E. B. White, Illus.). New York, NY: Putnam.

This issue of *The ALAN Review* is  
dedicated to the life and work of  
Walter Dean Myers.  
(1937–2014)



Photo credit: Constance Myers

“We need to tell young people that America was built by men and women of all colors and that the future of this country is dependent on the participation of all of our citizens.”

A POEM TO COMMEMORATE

**of course:**

t r u e change is always too slow  
and our best hopes rest with  
                                  s t e a d y  
  o n

beyond our own times  
the t r u e revolutions h a p p e n  
within the covers of our best books  
inside the noises of words with words  
inside the movements of reading eyes

so:

the writers are the engines  
the artists are the engines  
and the women and men  
and the girls and the boys  
reading those noisy books  
all are engines of true change

the words contain the power  
and the books must have that  
power and the noise of that  
story and the shout of that song  
must always be louder than the  
silence of the bullets and the  
silent deaths of grim despair

w e m o v e forward with love  
the s t r u g g l e c o n t i n u e s

arnold adoff

Copyright ©2015 The Arnold Adoff Revocable  
Living Trust. Used by Permission of Arnold Adoff

## Race Matters:

A Collaborative Conversation

**From the Editors:** In this article, we are honored to feature a written conversation between several YA authors who have addressed explicitly issues of race in their presentations and writings. We appreciate the generous response of these authors (and their publishers) and their willingness to engage with a difficult, highly personal topic in a very public way.

As to process, we generated and sent a series of questions to all of the authors at once. We compiled the initial responses they shared into a single document and then, over several iterations over several months, sent the compiled version back and forth to authors to solicit questions, elaborations, and revisions until all were satisfied with the end result.

We hope this piece both challenges readers and gives them hope.

**There is repeated suggestion in the media that people are resistant to talking about race. Such conversations are described as too difficult, unnecessary, too complicated, too emotional. What do you think?**

**Cynthia:** The resistance is akin to that felt when talking about gender, culture, faith, law, politics, or socioeconomics. Not coincidentally, it's tough to discuss any of those subjects without touching on all of them. They demand patience, empathy, nuanced expression, and listening that facilitates critical thinking—a high calling in an increasingly fast-paced, immediate-gratification world.

Yet it's still a conversation that comes more comfortably to me than to my parents, more readily to them than my grandparents.

As a child, my grandfather schemed with his siblings to escape an abusive Indian boarding school in dustbowl Oklahoma. Two generations later, *Rain Is Not My Indian Name*, my contemporary novel about a mixed-blood Native girl, was celebrated at a Library of Congress event in Washington D.C. Though work remains to be done, that demonstrates improvement and offers me hope.

**Walter:** While the questions are difficult, there is an element of racial stereotyping underpinning the silence. A case in point was my brief conversation with Governor Rick Perry at a librarians' meeting in Austin. Governor Perry asked me how we could get more African American and Latino children up to grade level. He was amenable to my suggestions of diversity and inclusion but seemed less convinced when I told him that I felt it was absolutely necessary to involve the African American and Latino communities. "You really think that's going to happen?" he asked. I did then, and I still do. I believe that Governor Perry is interested in solving these problems, but I don't believe he has sufficient faith in the communities to engage them from that perspective. He sees the needy communities, I believe, as too passive to help their own children.

History simply doesn't support this view. All of the historically Black colleges were created shortly after the Civil War when the opposition to these institutions was both legal and violent. Within 15 years after the war, there was a Black educated class. Does anybody need a book about how Black colleges were established?

**Matt:** Many people try and diffuse the energy of racially focused conversations by pointing out how far we've come as a country in terms of tolerance and equity. It's tempting to roll with that line of thinking because it's so much easier. We can all smile and nod and go on our way. But progress (when it comes to almost anything worthwhile) hurts. If I avoid issues of race in my books (considering the fact that my POV characters tend to be mixed race), I feel like I'm taking the easy way out. I'm not saying I have to stop the story all the time and overtly discuss racial issues. That's bad writing. But I'm always aware of who's brushing up against whom—because *they are aware*, both consciously and unconsciously. And I pay attention to the way scenes are laid out against each other. So much of today's racial tension is subtle and sophisticated. You have to find ways to show that in fiction. At the end of the day, I think it's completely naïve to think we'll ever live in some kind of racial harmony, which is why I don't look to arc beliefs too much over the course of a story.

**Coe:** Talking about race *is* hard; it makes a lot of people uncomfortable, which makes them want to avoid the subject altogether. That's completely understandable. However, it's important to realize there are many, *many* groups of people who don't have the luxury of being so uneasy with the subject of race that they get to opt out of dealing with it. They live the history and reality of racism on a daily basis. So when people express resistance to talking about race, I always wonder what that must be like, to be able to just not deal with it. Personally, that's never been something I've been able to do.

**Cynthia:** Building on what Coe said about opting out (or not) . . .

Early on, as a children's writer, I received repeated feedback that my Native-driven manuscripts were too crowded with brushstroke cultural references and allusions. I was urged not to risk overwhelming or confusing non-Indian readers and to block out explanations for any content that might not be readily digestible to them.

Prioritizing the outsider audience cheats all kids. First, it distorts the fictional heroes and stories

that should mirror young insider (and intersecting) readers. But it underestimates and shortchanges outsider kids, too.

I took five years of French language classes at my US high school and college. But I greatly increased my fluency during the summer I lived in Paris. Submersion served me far better than piece-meal servings.

**Gene:** Americans are simultaneously obsessed with and avoidant of race. Race is a big part of how we analyze weekend box office results, how we judge educational institutions, how we market products, how our comedians make us laugh. Yet, how many of us have had an honest, quiet conversation about race with a friend of a different background? We know it might get messy, so we avoid it.

I understand the impulse to avoid. I've been conflict avoidant all my life. Just the other day, I ate a salad I didn't order because I didn't want to offend the waiter who brought it to me. And let's be honest, sometimes avoiding the mess is a practical necessity. We've got bills to pay and children to raise. Who has the emotional energy to get messy?

But maybe story can play a part here. Walter talked about the importance of community, and I completely agree. The Chinese have a tradition of tackling current issues by referencing stories held in common by the community, stories that may even define the community. The stories can be historical or fictional, and they serve as a dispassionate starting point for discussing difficult, complicated, emotional topics.

Maybe our stories can do the same. Maybe they can ease us into those honest, quiet conversations.

**We are often quick to affix labels to authors. Are you a Black or Latino or Asian American or Native American author, or are you an author who is Black, Latino, Asian American, or Native American? Does it matter?**

**Gene:** I've noodled this question through before at various points in my career. I don't have a good answer. I'm an author. I'm Asian American. Regardless of whether I'm writing directly about Asian American issues, my cultural heritage finds its way

into my work. Like most writers, I draw heavily from my own life for my stories, even when I'm writing about century-old wars or talking frogs or teenagers who are able to manipulate the elements. I've lived an Asian American life, so it shows up in my writing, consciously or not.

This question—am I an Asian American author or an author who is Asian American?—stems from a fear of being pigeonholed. Will the market accept a book from me that isn't explicitly Asian American? Will I be considered for a licensed property that does not have an Asian or Asian American protagonist? Are my characters too Asian or not Asian enough?

If I spend too much of my energy thinking about all that, it will kill me creatively. I need to write the stories inside of me, let them come out the way they want to come out. Someone else can worry about the labels.

**Cynthia:** I'm a mixed-blood citizen of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation. "American Indian" and "Native American" are umbrella terms, the former of which is defined by US federal Indian law. In casual conversation, I use them interchangeably. In writing dialogue, I go with whatever makes the most sense for the individual speaker.

As a Native writer, personal experiences and insights fuel my stories. They offer a springboard for creating characters that are both like and different from me in that way. They suggest certain themes and inform my worldview.

But so does my background as a Mid-to-Southwesterner, a lower-middle class kid, a Wonder Woman fanatic, someone who saw "Star Wars" in the theater over 380 times and covered race as a journalist and co-founded a gender-rights law journal and adores the "Xanadu" album and married a cute Eurasian man and is awakened each morning by tabby cats.

**Matt:** Is it legal to quote rapper Eminem in this piece? "I am whoever you say I am." The biggest waste of time for any writer is to try and control the label affixed to his or her work by outside groups. I think it's better to focus on telling well-crafted, thoughtful stories driven by authentic characters. I'm almost always described as a Hispanic author,

which is fine, but my books seem more focused on the mixed-race experience. My first two books have sports elements, and sometimes I am referred to as a "sports book author." That used to bother me—because it seemed to marginalize the stories, and I was aiming at literature—but I left sports out of my next four books. My label seemed to change, but I still hate the idea that perception may have influenced my path as a writer.

**Walter:** It's important for us to be authors first. We develop our skills as authors so that we can then turn to our particular interests and present them meaningfully. Within the African American community, I've seen too many young authors encounter resistance because they were not writing what some critics described as being their purview.

**Coe:** Actually, all of those labels exhaust me. Why are they necessary for authors of color and not for White authors? If there's ever going to be hope for equality, we need to stop defaulting to White and labeling everyone who isn't.

**The industry has been increasingly criticized for not publishing works by and/or about a diverse array of people, particularly given the changing demographics of potential readers. Do you share this critique?**

**Gene:** I do, but we need to remember what the industry is. In books, in the storytelling arts in general, the relationship between the storyteller and her audience is sacrosanct. The entire publishing industry, when it's at its best, exists to facilitate that relationship.

There are certainly visionary publishers, but ultimately the book market is driven by the creators and the readers. If you want more diverse books, buy more diverse books. Buy them for yourself, your friends, your children, your coworkers. Rave about them on the Internet. Cosplay your favorite characters. Make t-shirts of your favorite lines.

And write more diverse books. Make them loud, make them beautiful, make them unstoppable. Invite readers into an unfamiliar world and compel them to stay.

Comics culture has a long tradition of taking

things into our own hands. Back when the Comics Code Authority was still policing content, Robert Crumb sold copies of *Zap Comix #1* out of a baby stroller in the streets of San Francisco. Jeff Smith self-published *Bone* at a time when most American comic shops wouldn't touch a book without capes in it. Jeff flew to a retailer convention on his own dime, stood outside the convention hall, and handed out samples of his book to shop owners.

Don't wait for the gatekeepers. Don't wait for some executive in a New York office to have an epiphany. Nothing against executives in New York—many of them are smart, talented, maybe even a little visionary. But you can do something about it. On your own. Right now.

**Cynthia:** Yes, diversifying the creators and champions of books—authors, artists, industry professionals, booksellers, educators, etc.—should be a priority.

**Coe:** When you look at the percentage of books published each year by authors of color, it's clear the industry has a lot more work to do. Things are slowly getting better—*very* slowly—but there's still a long way to go before the books being published truly reflect the diversity of this country.

**Cynthia:** I'd love to hear more conversation about industry outreach that still includes gatekeepers and affluent suburban girls but also reaches beyond them.

**Matt:** "If you build it, they will come." At the end of the day, our industry is focused on one thing: remaining viable (i.e., making money). Many publishing industry decision makers, in my opinion, believe publishing a diverse list of books is the right thing to do—just not at the expense of profit margins. But it's a fact that the face of the consumer is changing. Hispanics, for instance, are the fastest growing demographic in the country. So why are there so few books written by Hispanic authors, featuring Hispanic characters? Just wait a sec. Soon there will be a tipping point, and publishers will be competing for Hispanic readers. Eventually publishing diverse stories, written by diverse authors, will not only be the right thing to do, it will be the *lucrative* thing to do. We're not quite there yet.

Today is when authors, publishers, booksellers, educators, reviewers, and readers need to take a leap of faith, to get out in front of this change, to push. "If you build it, they will come."

**Walter:** Publishers have not been diligent in encouraging diversity or in having their editors expand their reading and cultural contacts so that they can discover new talent. Editorial staffs would do well to hold at least one meeting a month to discuss what they are reading in general. I can already hear the complaint that they are too busy for such a meeting! Diversity from the publisher's point of view would be fine, but I'm thinking that we also need to expand the market by creating more demand.

**Matt:** I am worried about one thing: that tomorrow's diverse storytellers will find a different medium. If publishing hasn't been historically welcoming of new diverse voices, maybe these voices skip right on past "the novel." But we need these future storytellers more than they need us. If the traditional novel is going to remain viable, we need the best talent out there.

**Coe:** I know what you mean, Matt. I have so many writer friends who have completely given up on getting their novels published by a "traditional" publisher. They have either taken to self-publishing, or they have found a different platform altogether—stage plays, screenplays, etc. As a people, especially a people of color, we are storytellers. It's part of our traditions. I wish the publishing world would catch up because we have a lot to say!

**The common narrative of minoritized youth is couched in deficit perspectives. Could/do your works serve as counter-narratives that challenge negative assumptions about youth/communities of color?**

**Coe:** I hope so! I want my work to show readers the complexity of the lives of kids and teens of color, that there's more there than what's shown in the media where their representation is far more negative than positive. My characters are often going through tough, true-to-life situations, and I

want readers to see this up close and know what it feels like. It's my belief that it's only through that kind of firsthand knowledge that there can be true understanding. While I never set out to write something that will serve the purpose of changing people's assumptions, I hope my novels give readers a more complete window into the lives—and hearts—of these kids.

**Walter:** I see my work not so much as counter-narratives but rather as expanded depictions of minorities. It's not unusual for teachers to come to me and say that some Black student did not read until they read one of my books, and then follow up the comment by saying that the book was about basketball (*Hoops*, *The Outside Shot*, *Slam*, *Game*), and that's what attracted the reader to the book. They don't realize that what attracts people to my books is that readers see images of themselves and of their families and communities that they are not going to find in other books. The teachers who find plenty of positive images of themselves in books don't understand how important just having cultural references is to young people who usually don't see themselves between the pages of a book.

One of my favorite books is called *Now Is Your Time: The African American Struggle for Freedom*. One critic complained that I didn't understand who the important figures were in African American history. I guess she thought she did. What she overlooked completely was my depiction of African American heroes within a family structure. I was so tired (and still am) of hearing African Americans from Martin Luther King, Jr. to Rosa Parks to Frederick Douglass praised as outstanding and exceptional individuals. Too many White historians depict every Black hero as someone who has done something *despite* the fact that he was Black and not because he was part of a Black family or society that led him to his accomplishments. So in *Now Is Your Time*, I used Malcolm Little's parents to show his development as an orator and activist, Frederick Douglass and his warrior sons, the escaped slave George Latimer and his son Lewis Latimer. I use families—not basketball!—whenever I can in my books because they represent the cultural substance that creates true readers.

**Cynthia:** I craft characters as individuals, not representations. However, some non-Indian adults may struggle (before failing) to reconcile my Native characters with the pervasive and persistent mainstream Wild-West-New-Age mythos. Non-Indian children and teen readers, on the other hand, tend to catch on quickly.

That said, I'm weary of the narrow default vision of Native teens as pitiable victims of reservation life. Do they face serious challenges? Of course (don't all teens?), but that stereotype underestimates their individuality, complexity, and communities. It dismisses their triumphs and potential. Furthermore, it fails to consider the hundreds of Native nations without reservations and the 80-plus percent of Indians who live in big cities.

According to *Indian Country Today*, the urban areas with the largest Native populations are (in descending order) New York City, Los Angeles, Phoenix, Oklahoma City, and Anchorage. Where are the stories of those kids?

In the Tantalize and Feral series, I've written African American, Asian American, and Mexican American main characters as well—not romanticized or exoticized or stereotyped, but rather grounded in multilayered identities and communities.

**Gene:** I hope [that my works serve as counter-narratives], but the readers themselves have more of a say in how my books are read and how they're used. The narratives surrounding Asian American youth are probably different from those surrounding the youth of other minority communities, but they can be limiting nonetheless.

More than anything, though, I hope I'm telling stories about human beings. I like what Cynthia said about crafting characters as individuals rather than representations. If we do that, counteracting preexisting narratives becomes a happy by-product, a side benefit. In fact, that's probably the only effective way to create counter-narratives.

**Matt:** When I read a novel where the author is overtly setting out to "challenge negative assumptions" or stereotypes, I cringe. My principal stance is this: story first. I try to take what I see and hear in the



world and then position these observations in such a way that, by the end of the novel, the reader sees what is already there in a slightly different light. An example of this strategy that has always moved me is the vignette “Darius and the Clouds” from Sandra Cisneros’s *House on Mango Street*. In it, Cisneros describes a boy, Darius, as someone who doesn’t like school, who is “sometimes stupid and mostly a fool,”—in other words, he’s the kind of boy you’d expect to see in this kind of neighborhood. But at the end of the vignette, Cisneros gives Darius a moment of wisdom that is magical and surprises the other kids. I try to keep this in mind in my own work. Sometimes the “thug” in the story is also capable of poetry.

#### For whom do you write?

**Walter:** I write for the person I am: Harlem-raised, from a foster family, from a family mired in poverty, who stumbled through many teenage adventures and who, somewhere along the way, discovered books.

**Matt:** I mostly write for a younger, more thoughtful version of myself. I write what I want to read. But over the past several years, I’ve had the opportunity to meet so many inspiring young men and women in high schools around the country—especially those at underprivileged high schools—that I now (secretly) write for them, too. They’re starved for books that feature characters that look and sound like them and their friends. I can’t tell you how moving it is when a young “mixed race” kid comes up to me after a presentation and riffs off my novel, *Mexican WhiteBoy*. “Hey, I’m like you. I’m a Korean WhiteGirl.” Or, “I’m a Colombian WhiteBoy.” Or, “I’m a Chinese BrownGirl.”

**Gene:** I write for the 14-year-old me. I make the comics I wanted to read when I was a kid. I write for the friends and family who read my early drafts. When I’m working on a book, I picture them laughing or gasping or rolling their eyes at certain panels.

And I write for anyone who’s willing to read one of my books.

**Cynthia:** First, I serve Story and then young readers, including Native readers and those of color. I appreciate grown-up enthusiasts, but if it comes down to what will resonate most with my target audience or fellow adults, the kids will win every time.

**Coe:** I started out writing for those teens who don’t see themselves reflected in literature, mostly black and brown kids who live in the inner city. I still have that audience in mind, but now that I’ve talked to so many kids and adults who have read my books, I realize I was being too narrow. I get emails and letters from teenagers of all races and backgrounds who tell me they relate to my books because, like my character Tyrell, they don’t have a father in the home or they also have family problems, etc. It’s a nice reminder that people read books for many reasons, not only to see their own lives. So, I guess you can say, I write for everyone!

#### Words of Tribute

**Matt:** I just wanted to take a minute also to express my profound gratitude for all the writers of color who have paved the way for us to do what we do. Walter Dean Myers has always been a huge inspiration to me—because of his books, but also because of the way he’s carried himself throughout his career. I study his interviews and pay attention to everything educators and booksellers say about him. What an incredible honor to be a part of this discussion with one of my (our) writing heroes.

**Cynthia:** Allow me to echo Matt’s sentiment. More personally, I first heard Walter Dean Myers speak at the Texas Book Festival in 2004 and was so inspired that I began scribbling notes on my work in progress during his presentation. I recall feeling guilty that I couldn’t give him my full attention and grateful that he had fueled such a fire in me.

I also jotted down his statement, “*People say you should write what you know, and I don’t think that’s true. I think you should write what you can imagine. That ability, that’s what makes you an author.*” At the time, I was writing my first fantasy—my first non-Native-themed novel—and his words felt like a blessing. Some giants cast shadows. Walter Dean Myers was a blazing sun.

**Coe Booth** is the author of *Tyrell*, which won the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Best Young Adult Novel, and was named an ALA Best Book for Young Adults and a New York Public Library Book for the Teen Age. Her new middle grade novel, *Kinda Like Brothers*, is the story of two boys who really don't get along—but have to find a way to figure it out. Her other books include *Kendra* and *Bronxwood*. She was born in the Bronx and still lives there. For more, check out [www.coebooth.com](http://www.coebooth.com).

**Matt de la Peña** is the author of five critically acclaimed young adult novels: *Ball Don't Lie*, *Mexican WhiteBoy*, *We Were Here*, *I Will Save You*, and *The Living*, for which he received the Pura Belpré Author Honor Award. His next book, *The Hunted*, will be published this May. Matt received his MFA in creative writing from San Diego State University and his BA from the University of the Pacific where he attended school on a full basketball scholarship. Matt teaches creative writing and visits high schools and colleges throughout the country. He has also published short fiction and essays in various newspapers and literary journals, including *The New York Times* and *NPR.org*.

**Walter Dean Myers** (1937–2014) was a prolific author of more than 100 fiction and nonfiction titles. He received every single major award in the field of children's literature. He was the author of 2 Newbery Honor books; 11 Coretta Scott King Author Award/Honor Books; 3 National Book Award Finalists, and the first ever Michael L. Printz Award. He was also the recipient of the Margaret A. Edwards Award for lifetime achievement in writing for young adults and was the first-ever recipient of the Coretta Scott King–Virginia Hamilton Award for Lifetime Achievement. He was the 2010 United States nominee for the Hans Christian Andersen Award and was nominated for the Astrid Lindgren Award numerous times. From 2012–2013, he served as the National Ambassador for Young People's Literature with the platform, "Reading Is Not Optional." *On a Clear Day (Crown/Random House)* was published posthumously.

**Cynthia Leitich Smith** is the New York Times and Publishers Weekly bestselling YA author of the *Feral* trilogy, which includes *Feral Nights*, *Feral Curse*, and *Feral Pride*

as well as the *Tantalize* series, which includes *Tantalize*, *Eternal*, *Blessed*, *Diabolical*, and two graphic novels, *Tantalize: Kieren's Story* and *Eternal: Zachary's Story* (all Candlewick). Her acclaimed novels are often noted for their diverse protagonists, humor, social conscience, and compelling action. Cynthia is also the author of several children's books, including *Jingle Dancer*, *Rain Is Not My Indian Name*, and *Indian Shoes* (all HarperChildrens). She is a citizen of the Muscogee Nation and has been named *Writer of the Year* by Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers. She also serves on the advisory board for *We Need Diverse Books*. Her website at [www.cynthialeitichsmith.com](http://www.cynthialeitichsmith.com) was named an ALA Great Website for Kids. Her *Cynsations* blog at [cynthialeitichsmith.blogspot.com/](http://cynthialeitichsmith.blogspot.com/) was listed as among the top two read by the children's/YA publishing community by SCBWI.

**Gene Luen Yang's** first book with *First Second*, *American Born Chinese*, is now in print in over 10 languages and was a National Book Award finalist and winner of the Printz Award. Yang's other works include the popular comics adaptation of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and the New York Times bestselling graphic novel diptych, *Boxers & Saints*. *The Shadow Hero*, the story of the first Asian American superhero, is his most recent graphic novel.

## References

- Cisneros, S. (1984). *The house on Mango Street*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Crumb, R. (1967). *Zap comix #1*. Chicago, IL: Apex Novelty.
- de la Peña, M. (2008). *Mexican whiteboy*. New York, NY: Delacorte.
- Myers, W. D. (2008). *Game*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Myers, W. D. (1996). *Slam*. New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Myers, W. D. (1991). *Now is your time: The African American struggle for freedom*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Myers, W. D. (1984). *The outside shot*. New York, NY: Delacorte.
- Myers, W. D. (1981). *Hoops*. New York, NY: Delacorte.
- Smith, C. L. (2013–2015). *Feral* series. Somerville, MA: Candlewick.
- Smith, C. L. (2007–2012). *Tantalize* series. Somerville, MA: Candlewick.
- Smith, C. L. (2001). *Rain is not my Indian name*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Smith, J. (2005). *Bone*. New York, NY: Graphix.

# Expanding the Canon: Classic African American Young Adult Literature

There are a number of young adult books generally considered to be traditional and contemporary classics.<sup>1</sup> A few examples include *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton (1967), *The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier (1974), *Annie on My Mind* by Nancy Garden (1982), and *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999). Harris (1990) writes, “Unfortunately, literary canons tend to include a preponderance of books that reflect the experiences, values, perspectives, knowledge, and interpretations of Whites, particularly Anglo-Saxons” (p. 540).

Rarely are books that are written by and about African Americans, or by other groups of color, referred to as classics in the children’s and young adult literary canon, “even though many exhibit extraordinary merit, expand or reinterpret literary forms, or provide a forum for voices silenced or ignored in mainstream literature” (Harris, 1990, pp. 540–541). For instance, in a study that aimed to determine the favorite classics of students in the upper elementary grades, *Charlotte’s Web* (White, 1952) was selected as the top choice (Wilson & Abrahamson, 1988). We were not able to identify any of the other titles (e.g., *Heidi* [Spyri, 1885] and *The Hobbit* [Tolkien, 1937]) that were presented to the children to vote on as their favorites as

being written about or by people of color. We believe that there are a number of young adult books written by and about African Americans that can be considered classics.

In this article, we will examine the term “classic” and how it is defined based on scholarship, as well as explicate our methodology and the procedures used for interviewing numerous experts about what they consider to be classic African American young adult texts. Then we will explain the three main categories into which we placed the African American young adult books deemed classics and conclude with future implications and reasons as to why this research is significant.

## How Is a Classic Defined?

There is no concise definition of the term “classic.” Rudine Sims Bishop writes that a classic “is a book with a theme and a literary style that stands the test of time” (personal communication, January 8, 2008), while Dianne Johnson considers a classic to be “a text of enduring and timeless value to the extent that it offers insight into and illumination of our cultural, historical, political, and imaginative experience—broadly defined” (personal communication, February 6, 2008). As far back as 1910, Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve (1910) grappled with this issue and wrote that “a true classic . . . is an author who has enriched the human mind, increased its treasure, and caused it to advance a step” (p. 129). Violet J. Harris notes:

I define a book as classic in two ways, traditional or contemporary. Some criteria for both include literary and/or artistic

1 While it is commonplace for secondary teachers to share classic adult books (e.g., *A Tale of Two Cities* [1859] by Charles Dickens, *Moby Dick* [1851] by Herman Melville, and *The Great Gatsby* [1925] by F. Scott Fitzgerald) with high school students, this article focuses on literature created specifically for a young adult audience.

merit as determined by experts, selection by readers over several generations, and books in the vanguard of creativity that reach a small audience but challenge, advance, or reinterpret prevailing themes, characterizations, language, and so forth. The definition is expansive and does not allow for restriction or inclusion based on characteristics of the author or the author's culture(s). (personal communication, March 22, 2008)

Harris's definition is especially pertinent in that it challenges the idea that only books written by authors who are members of mainstream cultural groups should be considered classics, an important assertion that undergirds this article.

Likewise, Lawrence R. Sipe (1996) argued that when designating books as classics, it is important for educators, librarians, parents, reviewers, and others "to consider what implicit, unspoken criteria are being used," as "only then can we critically examine our own criteria and possibly modify, refine, or develop new, more thoughtful ones" (p. 31). So, for example, scholars and librarians with expertise in young adult literature can reflect upon whether all of the books they consider to be classics are written by Whites, and if so, why this is so in spite of the large, noteworthy bodies of work created by African American authors such as Angela Johnson, Walter Dean Myers, and Jacqueline Woodson. Sipe also believed that readers play a considerable role in the designation of books as classics, perhaps more so than the actual works themselves. It could be argued that educators, in particular, play a crucial role in the designation of books as classics by their acceptance and continual use of certain titles, recommendations to parents, summer reading lists, etc. Though there may be variances across scholars in terms of how to define classics, there are some commonalities, which include factors such as "holding power" (Winfield, 1986, p. 26) or enduring and timeless appeal across generations, "being landmarks or breakthroughs in some way" (McNair, 2010, p. 97), exceptional writing, and literary innovation.

## Methodology

To amass a sampling of African American texts considered classics, a number of experts across various disciplines were asked to complete a brief survey. Invited respondents were chosen based upon their expertise in children's literature with a special emphasis on knowledge of books written by and about African

Americans. These scholars completed the survey: Rudine Sims Bishop, Lesley Colabucci, Violet J. Harris, Dianne Johnson, Jonda C. McNair, Lawrence R. Sipe, and Henrietta M. Smith. Dr. Henrietta M. Smith is a Professor Emerita of Library and Information Science, and Dr. Dianne Johnson is a professor of English. The remaining scholars are (or were at the time) professors of Education. The survey respondents lived in various parts of the United States, including Ohio, Pennsylvania, Florida, South Carolina, and Illinois. The two White survey respondents held in-depth expertise in children's literature of all kinds, including African American children's literature. The remaining respondents are Black with specific scholarly expertise in children's literature written by and about African Americans.

Several of these survey respondents have written scholarly texts about African American literature, such as *Telling Tales: The Pedagogy and Promise of African American Literature for Youth* (Johnson, 1990) and *Free within Ourselves: The Development of African American Children's Literature* (Bishop, 2007). In addition, most of these scholars have extensive experience serving on book award selection committees, such as the Pura Belpré, Randolph Caldecott, John Newbery, and Coretta Scott King award committees. In fact, Rudine Sims Bishop is currently serving on the 2015 Coretta Scott King Book Award jury.

All survey respondents were asked to: 1) define the term "classic"; 2) identify and list books written by and about African Americans published after 1950 that they considered classics (no list of titles to select from was provided to them); and 3) select two of the books they identified and speak specifically to what it is about these particular texts that makes them classics. The surveys were completed via e-mail, though one participant did send her response via snail mail. We chose 1950 as a cut-off date because we wanted to ensure that the majority of the books identified would be in print and easily accessible to teachers. Also, we recognize that young adult literature is not considered to have come of age until the late 1960s and early 1970s (Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson, & Nilsen, 2013).

The survey respondents identified a total of 85 books. We then selected titles that were identified as classics *by at least two survey respondents*. This criterion was intended to avoid including a book that represented an idiosyncratic selection from a respondent

and to ensure a basic degree of inter-rater agreement. This narrowed our list to 44 texts, the majority of which were picturebooks and middle-grade novels. Six young adult books were named by at least two survey respondents as classics. We examined these six books as our final data set. They include: *Miracle's Boys* (Woodson, 2000), *Toning the Sweep* (Johnson, 1993), *His Own Where* (Jordan, 1971), *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* (Woodson, 1995), *Monster* (Myers, 1999) and *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales* (Hamilton, 1985).

The remaining 38 titles were picturebooks or middle grade novels (e.g., *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* [Taylor, 1976], and *Elijah of Buxton* [Curtis, 2007]) that could be appropriate for some young adult readers.<sup>2</sup> It could be argued, too, that some of the young adult books (e.g., *Fallen Angels* [Myers, 1988], *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* [Woodson, 1994], and *The Skin I'm In* [Flake, 1998]) identified by only one survey respondent are indeed (or destined to become) classics. It could also be argued that some titles (e.g., *A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich* [Childress, 1973]) that were not listed by any of the respondents are classics, too. The purpose of this study was not to identify all African American classic texts or to derive a definitive list, but to assert that there *are* classic young adult books written by and about African Americans and to identify a sampling of them.

Drawing from the responses of those surveyed as well as relevant scholarship, we utilized qualitative analysis to develop three categories in which to place the six selected African American young adult books. Over a period of several months, we read across all of the respondents' survey data, as well as scholarship (e.g., books and articles) related to classic literature, and looked for key terms and themes (e.g., universality) that surfaced repeatedly. The three resulting categories include: universal experiences from an African American perspective, breakthrough books, and literary innovation. In some cases, we noted that there was overlap, but we chose to place books in a single category based on their predominant aspects.

2 Table 1 lists middle grade books identified as classics by at least two survey respondents that we believe are suitable for a young adult audience.

## Universal Experiences from an African American Perspective

The two books representing our category of universal experiences are *Miracle's Boys* by Jacqueline Woodson (2000) and Angela Johnson's *Toning the Sweep* (1993). Universal books, while infused with authentic cultural practices and depictions, still provide readers from all backgrounds ways to genuinely connect to the stories. We argue that the overriding themes presented within the narratives are universal in nature. These themes embody the potential to resonate with readers regardless of ethnicity or racial background. In response to whether African American universal books exist, young adult author Angela Johnson offers the following explanation:

I believe we're all connected. One of the big problems in this country is people don't always feel that they are connected. We're all on this road together, bumping into each other, and we're all so connected. We have been thrown in this place.

**Table 1. Additional African American classic literature for young adults**

Title	Author	Publication Year	Publisher	Category
<i>Elijah of Buxton</i>	Christopher Paul Curtis	2007	Scholastic	Breakthrough
<i>Lonesome Boy</i>	Arna Bontemps	1955	Houghton Mifflin	Literary Innovation
<i>M.C. Higgins the Great</i>	Virginia Hamilton	1975	Aladdin	Breakthrough
<i>Middle Passage</i>	Tom Feelings	1995	Dial	Literary Innovation
<i>North Town</i>	Lorenz Graham	1965	Crowell	Breakthrough
<i>Return to North Town</i>	Lorenz Graham	1976	Crowell	Breakthrough
<i>Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry</i>	Mildred Taylor	1976	Dial	Breakthrough
<i>Scorpions</i>	Walter Dean Myers	1988	Harper & Row	Breakthrough
<i>South Town</i>	Lorenz Graham	1958	Follett	Breakthrough
<i>Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963</i>	Christopher Paul Curtis	1995	Delacorte	Literary Innovation
<i>Whose Town?</i>	Lorenz Graham	1969	Crowell	Breakthrough

There has to come a time where we say, “It doesn’t really matter if he’s black or if he’s Asian or if he’s white. This is a universal story.” In the end what I want is for anyone to be able to pick up one of these books and it doesn’t matter: the color of the children, where they live. All of these stories are everyone’s story. If anyone can pick my book up and say, “Yes, this is just a wonderful story; I’ve felt this; I knew someone who felt this,” then I’ve done what I was supposed to do. What else is there? (TeachingBooks.net, 2005, para 51)

While books with universal experiences address a wide range of themes, the two books selected by our experts focus on the recent or impending death of a beloved parent.

In Woodson’s *Miracle’s Boys* (2000), the three lead characters (brothers Charlie, Lafayette, and

Ty’ree) must carry on after the unexpected loss of their mother to diabetes, a pervasive disease within the African American community. Having already endured their father’s tragic death, the three boys face learning to cope with abandonment and a daunting parentless existence. Their ability to go on despite the tragedies they have endured represents a miracle, so to speak.

Angela Johnson, a recipi-

ent of the Coretta Scott King Author Award for *Toning the Sweep* (1993) and other books, writes through the voice of Emmie, the protagonist. During Emmie’s visit to Grandmother Ola at her home in the desert, Ola prepares to move because she has an incurable illness that prevents her from continuing to live alone. Throughout the book, Emmie reminisces with her mother and Ola’s close friends without openly acknowledging the impending loss of her grandmother.

Across the two stories, death is conceived of differently—in one, tragically, and in the other, through a slow contemplative process characteristic of an incurable disease diagnosis. The internal dialogues of the characters capture their struggles to understand death, healing, and moving forward. For example, the inevitability of her grandmother’s passing causes Emmie to recall insights shared by her father:

I miss daddy now. He told me that all we are is soul—most of us. I want to believe it. If you believe that, then when people die and are buried, you’ll never miss them. You can sit and think about them. Your heart will never hurt for them, “cause all they ever were was soul.” (1993, p. 66)

Similarly, Lafayette, one of the three brothers in Woodson’s *Miracle’s Boys*, clings to his aunt’s figurative advice, “My great-aunt Cecile’s all the time saying dead don’t have to mean dead and gone, and I like to believe that” (p. 19).

Both stories suggest a reliance on intergenerational and cross-generational family support to accept the tragedies and appreciate joyful times of the past. The stages of grief unfold in specific, although universal, ways. First, the characters experience denial, followed by guilt and anger, and then a gradual transition to acceptance. In the final chapter of *Miracle’s Boys* (Woodson, 2000), the brothers decide not to keep erasing memories of their mother. They begin to recall her fondly:

“Mama used to say she’d buy three more of us if she was rich enough,” Ty’ree said. Charlie pulled me a little bit closer to him. After a long time had passed, he said, “What else did she use to say?” When Ty’ree started talking, his voice was low and even, like he was reaching way back to remember. Me and Charlie leaned forward, leaned into our brother, to listen. (pp. 130–131)

While the universal theme of death and dying gets depicted in both stories, different portrayals of African American life are captured. Lafayette’s family resides in an urban city and comes from a low-income household (Woodson, 2000). Their urban traditions commemorating death and funerals vary distinctively from the family in *Toning the Sweep* (Johnson, 1993). Ola’s family comes from Southern origins, and they embrace particular cultural traditions such as the long-standing death ritual evoked through the title—toning the sweep, a tradition of striking metal after a loved one passes away, “to ring the dead person’s soul to heaven” (Johnson, 1993, p. 65). At the same time, Ola practices the learned customs and traditions consistent with the Southwestern desert life she adopted after leaving the South.

These two stories embody layers of cultural specificity that might cause one to question whether a book with universal experiences can resonate with African American as well as non-African American readers. Woodson has spoken regrettably about the

---

**Both stories suggest a reliance on intergenerational and cross-generational family support to accept the tragedies and appreciate joyful times of the past.**

---

“... inability of publishers, judges and readers to recognize the universality of the black protagonist” (2001, p. 58). To that point, we argue that the rich cultural milieu found in these two books deepens the theme of death and dying by making the stories believable and relatable no matter your race or ethnicity.

## Breakthrough Books

We selected two illustrative texts to represent the category of “breakthrough.” These books, *His Own Where* (Jordan, 1971) and *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* (Woodson, 1995), depict linguistic and sexual practices that have caused shame within and against those in the African American community. June Jordan and Jacqueline Woodson provide windows into these practices by calling forth questions about identity and compelling readers to confront their own biases. Both stories unfold around forbidden love relationships between two unsuspecting people. Because ambiguous questions about identity and morality are evoked, family members respond to the relationships with angst and anger.

*His Own Where* (Jordan, 1971), not a well-known book or read in today’s contemporary classrooms, exemplifies our breakthrough category because of a unique stylistic decision made by June Jordan. Jordan told this contemporary story through characters speaking African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Bishop has written that:

One of the most notable features of this brief novel is its language. Reflecting the Black Arts Movement emphasis on oral language, it was written entirely in a lyrical, stylized rendition of what Jordan called Black English. (2007, p. 213)

At the time of publication, this novel was selected as a finalist for the National Book Award (Bishop, 2007).

The story is a portrayal of urban life that examines issues of young love, abuse, and abandonment through the linguistic vernacular of two urban teenagers. While visiting his ill father each day in the hospital, Buddy falls in love with Angela, the 16-year-old daughter of a nurse. Angela endures physical abuse by her father in retribution for engaging in alleged sexual behaviors with Buddy.

Throughout the story, Buddy stands out as a courageous and thoughtful young man who fights against societal stereotypes that sometimes come from the Black community. Buddy becomes Angela’s protec-

tor and summons the courage to enjoy his budding relationship despite his father’s decline. Expressed eloquently through AAVE, the excerpt below reveals Buddy’s questioning of how his life has unfolded:

His life form into habits following his love. Angela and the hospital and his father all roll into hours that he spend with them. Now every night he be walking Angela home from the hospital and then he go back there and stay there at the hospital watching his father/ the body of his father on the hospital bed until they make him leave. (Jordan, 1971, p. 23)

During the seventies, and even up until the present, the language comfortably expressed in the African American community garnered interpretations by mainstream society as “broken English” or “ignorant speech.” As a language and literacy community, scholars were less familiar with terms such as “code switching” or “linguistic diversity” to specify the cross-fertilization of language in context. At the time the book was written (early 1970s), sociolinguists and anthropologists (Smitherman, 2000) found themselves in the midst of heated controversial debates to define and legitimize AAVE as a language or, at a minimum, a legitimate speech vernacular.

In Jordan’s breakthrough book, Buddy’s internal monologues courageously happen in the everyday vernacular he uses to make sense of his life. As a contemporary rather than historical narrative where varied language use more commonly appears, Jordan’s stylistic decision altered the parameters of possibility in the emerging growth of young adult literature.

Like Buddy, Melanin Sun, a 14-year-old youth in Jacqueline Woodson’s book, *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* (1995), is a remarkable protagonist. In this story, Melanin’s African American mother falls in love with a White woman. As the second book in this category, we believe it is breakthrough for reasons similar to those given for *His Own Where* (Jordan, 1971). At the time of publication, no other

---

**As a contemporary rather than historical narrative where varied language use more commonly appears, Jordan’s stylistic decision altered the parameters of possibility in the emerging growth of young adult literature.**

---

young adult African American writer had depicted homosexuality between two women of different racial backgrounds.

In the most obvious ways, this story addresses the love experienced by lesbians. At the same time, however, it also addresses Melanin's grappling with his own identity in light of his mother's new relationship. Not only are issues of sexual orientation taken up, but Melanin must also examine his manhood and Black identity. With regard to the salient themes addressed in this novel, Woodson explains the following:

The book is about a boy who is trying to figure out who he is, like so many adolescents are trying to figure out who they are. So yes, Melanin Sun's mother is gay, and this is what his struggle is this particular summer, as he wonders about the fact that his mother has just come out and what this might mean about him. In the last part of the book, Melanin Sun says, "I didn't know what would happen tomorrow or the next day or the next . . . but I was sure of me and maybe that's all that matters." (Hinton, 2004, p. 28)

The community in which Melanin lives consists of Dominicans and African Americans. It is described as one of the few that would take in a youngster and single mom of their racial background and Melanin's deep, dark skin color. Melanin's reactions to his mother's decisions are amplified by the shame and embarrassment he believes his community

will evoke within him. For example, when sitting with his mother's White girlfriend on the beach, Melanin contemplates the inner resolve he'll need to ignore others' views of such an unexpected relationship:

We sat there without saying anything for a long time. . . . But I didn't care anymore what people were thinking. Some part of me was starting to move inside of myself, shutting out all those nosey eyes and nasty things people can think to say. (Woodson, 1995, p. 124)

Jacqueline Woodson does not steer away from provocations about difference in her books. In fact, many of them push readers to ask *Why do we view and label others in particular ways?* Woodson writes stories that provide multidimensional perspectives of what it means to be an African American, a boy or girl, straight or gay, rich or poor, etc. Very little about her characters' identities remain static, assumed, or taken for granted. We suspect that this aspect of her work likely characterizes not only *The Notebooks of Melanin Sun* (1995) but much of her other writing as breakthrough.

## Literary Innovations

The two young adult books selected for this category are exceptional in terms of literary innovations, such as style and language: *Monster* (Myers, 1999) and *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales* (Hamilton, 1985). *Monster* is the story of a teenager named Steve Harmon who is on trial for murder after supposedly participating in a botched armed robbery by serving as a lookout. *The People Could Fly* is a collection of 24 folktales focusing on a range of topics related to the Black experience.

*Monster* (Myers, 1999) was the first recipient of the Michael L. Printz Award for Excellence in Young Adult Literature, which makes it a breakthrough or landmark title in some respects; however, we believe that what was most conspicuous about this book was its innovative literary style. Steve is 16 years old and locked up in a juvenile detention center when he decides to tell his story in the form of a movie, complete with voice-overs, camera shots, and credits. His journal entries, represented in a font that resembles actual handwriting, are interspersed throughout the book. A portion of the text reads:

Maybe I could make my own movie. I could write it out and play it in my head. I could block out the scenes like we did in school. The film will be the story of my life. No, not my life, but of this experience. I'll write it down in the notebook they let me keep. I'll call it what the lady who is the prosecutor called me. **MONSTER**. (Myers, 1999, pp. 5–6)

It is the telling of Steve's experience in this manner that makes the book innovative from a literary standpoint. Dianne Johnson described this book as a classic ". . . because it is an inventive, literary critique of the plight of late twentieth century black boys" (personal

---

**Woodson writes stories that provide multidimensional perspectives of what it means to be an African American, a boy or girl, straight or gay, rich or poor, etc. Very little about her characters' identities remain static, assumed, or taken for granted. We suspect that this aspect of her work likely characterizes . . . much of her other writing as breakthrough.**

---



communication, February 6, 2008). Myers touches on the plight of Black boys by highlighting the imbalance in terms of detention rates for some groups of color. At one point, the book focuses on the inside of the cells and the sounds that the inmates make, noting that “Most of the voices are clearly Black or Hispanic” (p. 7). The text indicates when the camera is fading in, focusing on particular scenes, and cutting from one to another. The movie is described as being written and directed by Steve Harmon, and key figures, including the prosecutor and his “Defense Attorney with Doubts” (p. 10), are listed in the way that actors and actresses in a movie would be. The text also notes specifics about the “set design,” as well as props and wardrobe descriptions: “handcuffs, and prison outfits by the State of New York” (p. 11). Myers writes about an experience that speaks to a pressing issue in American society with racial and socioeconomic underpinnings, and he does so in an innovative format that is unique and appealing to young adult readers.

*The People Could Fly* (Hamilton, 1985) includes folktales divided into four sections that focus on animals, the extravagant and fanciful, the supernatural, and freedom from slavery. Bishop (2007) wrote that “this was the book that revived interest in African American folktales as children’s literature, over and above the numerous African folktales that have been published as picture books and in compilations” (p. 200). Hamilton captures the enduring and irrepressible spirit of Africans who, in spite of the horrific circumstances of slavery, managed to tell stories, generate riddles and jokes, and sing songs. She wrote that “no amount of hard labor and suffering could suppress their powers of imagination” (p. x). What makes this book innovative is its use of language and the manner in which Hamilton subverts the ways it was used by others such as Joel Chandler Harris when telling similar tales. Harris writes,

I consider Virginia Hamilton’s *The People Could Fly* a classic because of its artistic merit. Hamilton re-envisioned African American folktales and usurped the stereotypic “plantation dialect” with language that more closely represented the natural progression of language from pidgin to Creole to African American Vernacular English. The linguistic style more clearly captures the cadences and rhythms of AAVE. (personal communication, March 22, 2008)

In a folktale titled, “How Nehemiah Got Free,” part of the text reads:

In slavery time, there was smart slaves and they did most what they wanted to do by usin just their wits. Hangin around the big house, they kept the slaveowners laughin. They had to “bow and scrape” some, but they often was able to draw the least hard tasks. Nehemiah was a one who believed that if he must be a slave, he’d best be a smart one. No one who callin himself Master of Nehemiah had ever been able to make him work hard for nothin. (p. 147)

This language, unlike that of Joel Chandler Harris, is intelligible, and it depicts Nehemiah in a savvy light as a slave who is challenging the unfair system in which slaves are forced to toil long hours for no pay. Hamilton’s use of language reflects the linguistic patterns of Blacks but in a respectful manner that recognizes their dignity, humanity, and intelligence.

## Conclusion

Schoolwide and classroom libraries that hold the books we have discussed here offer readers of all backgrounds exposure to a wide variety of genres, writers, and perspectives. However, their unique value to African American youth cannot be underestimated. Myers (2014) explains the feelings of African American readers who notice their lives represented in books:

They have been struck by the recognition of themselves in the story, a validation of their existence as human beings, an acknowledgment of their value by someone who understands who they are. It is the shock of recognition at its highest level.

The authors of the books selected warrant particular mention here as well. Most of these authors work (or did so before their deaths) passionately to expand the readership of their stories while simultaneously trying to convince publishers of their value. They are acclaimed writers committed to an industry that publishes a relatively small percentage of books each year by and about African Americans (Cooperative Children’s

---

**Schoolwide and classroom libraries that hold the books we have discussed here offer readers of all backgrounds exposure to a wide variety of genres, writers, and perspectives. However, their unique value to African American youth cannot be underestimated.**

---

Book Center, n.d.). Anecdotal evidence suggests, for example, that these books even remain difficult to find in chain bookstores such as Barnes & Noble.

For educators interested in expanding the typical canon of classics purchased for their classroom libraries or incorporated into their literature-based pedagogies, we encourage use of

the heuristic we discuss in this piece. Both teachers and scholars can examine books relative to their universal appeal, breakthrough characteristics (e.g., use of language, unique themes), and literary innovations.

Although only applied to African American literature in this article, we believe this heuristic is useful for books written about all racial and ethnic groups.

We also encourage educators to be informed by the literacy practices and responses of the readers within their reach. Certainly, many teachers can identify books that consistently stand out to their students for a variety of compelling reasons. Relying on readers a bit more enables a nuanced and contextualized consideration of a classic

story to take hold. As former classroom teachers, we realize that some of the books highly favored by the urban youth we taught never reached the status of a classic.

In our effort to identify classic African American young adult literature, we knowingly push the boundaries related to the identification of these books. While we do not argue against the notion of a classic, we regrettably contend that a number of classic books written about diverse groups (like those presented in this article) remain ignored. The six books reviewed throughout this manuscript represent, in our view, the very best in young adult books written by and about African Americans. We've identified three categories

(universal experiences, breakthrough, and literary innovations) that group classics from a literary tradition now decades old (Bishop, 2007). Teachers or librarians who maintain the typical view of a classic, knowingly or perhaps unknowingly, participate in perpetuating a narrow view of a literary classic that arguably sends subtle messages to young people about whose stories remain worth telling. And while this article addresses African American young adult literature, an expanded view of a classic would necessarily include noteworthy books from other multicultural literary traditions such as Latina/o, American Indian, and Asian American that will engage young adult readers for decades and decades to come.

*Wanda M. Brooks is an associate professor of Literacy Education at Temple University in Pennsylvania. Her research addresses the literary responses of middle school youth who read young adult literature written by and about African Americans. Wanda is currently serving in the role of Associate Dean of Teacher Education. She has published in journals such as Research in the Teaching of English, Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, Children's Literature in Education, and The Reading Teacher.*

*Jonda C. McNair is an associate professor of Literacy Education at Clemson University in South Carolina. She specializes in literature intended for youth with an emphasis on books written by and about African Americans. Jonda is currently serving as a coeditor of the Journal of Children's Literature and as chair of the Coretta Scott King Book Award Committee. Her scholarship has been published in numerous journals including The Reading Teacher, Children's Literature in Education, The Journal of Negro Education, and Language Arts.*

## References

- Anderson, L. H. (1999). *Speak*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Bishop, R. S. (2007). *Free within ourselves: The development of African American children's literature*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Childress, A. (1973). *A hero ain't nothin' but a sandwich*. New York, NY: Coward, McCann.
- Cooperative Children's Book Center. (n.d.). *Children's books by and about people of color published in the United States: Statistics gathered by the Cooperative Children's Book Center, School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison*. Retrieved from <http://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pcstats.asp>.
- Cormier, R. (1974). *The chocolate war*. New York, NY: Random House.

---

**In our effort to identify classic African American young adult literature, we knowingly push the boundaries related to the identification of these books. While we do not argue against the notion of a classic, we regrettably contend that a number of classic books written about diverse groups (like those presented in this article) remain ignored.**

---

- Curtis, C. P. (2007). *Elijah of Buxton*. New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Dickens, C. (1859). *A tale of two cities*. London, England: Chapman & Hall.
- Fitzgerald, F. S. (1925). *The great Gatsby*. New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Flake, S. (1998). *The skin I'm in*. New York, NY: Jump at the Sun/Hyperion.
- Garden, N. (1982). *Annie on my mind*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Hamilton, V. (1985). *The people could fly: American Black folktales*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Harris, V. J. (1990). African American children's literature: The first one hundred years. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 59, 540–555.
- Hinton, K. (2004). Speaking about thematic studies: Jacqueline Woodson: Keeping it real about social issues. *Journal of Children's Literature*, 30(1), 26–30.
- Hinton, S. E. (1967). *The outsiders*. New York, NY: Viking.
- Johnson, D. (1990). *Telling tales: The pedagogy and promise of African American literature for youth*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Johnson, A. (1993). *Toning the sweep*. New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Jordan, J. (1971). *His own where*. New York, NY: First Feminist.
- McNair, J. C. (2010). Classic African American children's literature. *The Reading Teacher*, 64, 96–105.
- Melville, H. (1851). *Moby Dick*. New York, NY: Harper & Brothers.
- Myers, W. D. (1988). *Fallen angels*. New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Myers, W. D. (1999). *Monster*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Myers, W. D. (2014, March 15). Where are the people of color in children's books? *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/16/opinion/sunday/where-are-the-people-of-color-in-childrens-books.html>.
- Nilson, A. P., Blasingame, J., Donelson, K. L., & Nilsen, D. L. F. (2013). *Literature for today's young adults*. Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Sainte-Beuve, C. A. (1910). What is a classic? In C. Eliot (Ed.), *The Harvard classics: Literary and philosophical essays, volume 32* (pp. 126–139). New York, NY: P. F. Collier & Son.
- Sipe, L. R. (1996). The idea of a classic. *Journal of Children's Literature*, 22, 31–33.
- Smitherman, G. (2000). *Talkin that talk: Language, culture, and education in African America*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Spyri, J. (1885). *Heidi*. Boston, MA: Cupples, Upham.
- Taylor, M. (1976). *Roll of thunder, hear my cry*. New York, NY: Dial.
- TeachingBooks.net. (2005). *Angela Johnson: Author program in-depth interview*. Retrieved from <http://www.teachingbooks.net/interview.cgi?id=28&a=1>.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. (1937). *The hobbit*. London, England: George Allen & Unwin.
- White, E. B. (1952). *Charlotte's web*. New York, NY: Harper & Brothers.
- Wilson, P. J., & Abrahamson, R. F. (1988). What children's literature classics do children really enjoy? *The Reading Teacher*, 41, 406–411.
- Winfield, E. T. (1986). Why children should read the classics. *PTA Today*, 11, 26–27.
- Woodson, J. (1994). *I hadn't meant to tell you this*. New York, NY: Bantam, Doubleday, Dell.
- Woodson, J. (1995). *From the notebooks of Melanin Sun*. New York, NY: Penguin.
- Woodson, J. (2000). *Miracle's boys*. New York, NY: Penguin.
- Woodson, J. (2001). Acceptance speech for the 2001 Coretta Scott King Award. *School Library Journal*, 47(8), 57–58.

## 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)

---

**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.**

---

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

---

**In the context of our study, [literacy] also encompasses “symbolic communication,” such as musical notation, pictorial notation, numeracy, and symbolic action, intended to deliver a message as literacy.**

---

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

---

**We were compelled to establish four additional metaphors: literacy as historical inclusion, denial of literacy, literacy as justice, and literacy as injustice.**

---

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.

---

**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.**

---

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.

***Kristine Gritter** is an associate professor in Literacy at Seattle Pacific University where she teaches Young Adult Literature and Children’s Literature as well as content area literacy courses. She formerly taught middle school in Miami, Florida, and attended Michigan State University for her Ph.D. As a researcher, she is interested in incorporating the creation legends of local tribal elders as important interdisciplinary texts to teach lessons of sustainability and critical literacy and to explore what the cultural artifacts of award-winning books written for children and young adults mean for deeper understanding of our time in history.*

***Xu Bian** is a doctoral student in Teacher Education at Seattle Pacific University. She works as Dr. Gritter’s graduate assistant and teaches an ESL course at the A.C.E. Language Institute. She received her Bachelor of Arts in English Literature from Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou, China, and received a Master of Education in Psycholinguistics from South China Normal University in Guangzhou, China. She spent 8 years as an instructor of English literature in Zhongkai University of Agriculture and Engineering, Guangzhou, China. Her research interests currently focus on literacy and literature.*

***Kristi Kanehen** is the certification specialist at Seattle Pacific University’s School of Education. She works with*

undergraduate and graduate students seeking their initial teaching certificates. She earned her Bachelor of Arts in English Literature from Seattle Pacific University. She is an avid reader of science fiction, fantasy, young adult literature, and children's literature. As a Japanese American having lived in both Honolulu, Hawaii, and Culver City, California, she has had the unique experience of being in the majority and minority racial group.

## References

- Alvermann, D. E. (2001). Effective literacy instruction for adolescents (Executive summary and paper commissioned by the National Reading Conference). Chicago, IL: National Reading Conference.
- Association for Library Service to Children. (n.d.). Welcome to the Newbery Medal home page! Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/newberymedal/newberymedal>.
- Blackburn, M. V., & Smith, J. M. (2010). Moving beyond the inclusion of LGBT-themed literature in English language arts classrooms: Interrogating heteronormativity and exploring intersectionality. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *53*, 625–634.
- Bodart, J. R., Barrineau, A. N., & Flamino, M. L. (2011). The Printz award winners under a microscope: Content trends, committee challenges, and teen popularity. Retrieved from <http://www.yalsa.ala.org/jrly/2011/02/the-printz-award-winners-under-a-microscope-content-trends-committee-challenges-and-teen-popularity/>.
- Bruns, C. V. (2011). *Why literature? The value of literary reading and what it means to teaching*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Czaplinski, S. M. (1972). *Sexism in award winning picture books*. Pittsburgh, PA: Know.
- Davis, A. P., & McDaniel, T. R. (1999). You've come a long way, baby—or have you? Research evaluating gender portrayal in recent Caldecott-winning books. *The Reading Teacher*, *52*, 532–536.
- Gallego, M., & Hollingsworth, S. (2000). *What counts as literacy: Challenging the school standards*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Kaplan, J. (2011). Why literacy (and young adult literature) matters: A review of current research. *The Alan Review*, *38*(3), 69–72. Retrieved from <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/v38n3/pdf/kaplan.pdf>.
- Kelder, R. (1996). Rethinking literacy studies: From the past to the present. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED417373.pdf>.
- Koss, M. D., & Teale, W. H. (2009). What's happening in YA literature? Trends for books for adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *52*, 563–572.
- Mace, J. (1992). Television and metaphors of literacy. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, *24*, 162–175.
- National Council of Teachers of English. (n.d.). NCTE Orbis Pictus Award for outstanding nonfiction for children. Retrieved from <http://www.ncte.org/awards/orbispictus>.
- Ryan, C. L., & Hermann-Wilmarth, J. M. (2013). Already on the shelf: Queer readings of award-winning children's literature. *Journal of Literacy Research*, *45*, 142–172.
- Schieble, M. (2012). Critical conversations on Whiteness with young adult literature. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *56*, 212–221.
- Scribner, S. (1984). Literacy in three metaphors. *American Journal of Education*, *93*(1), 6–21.
- Serafini, F. (2007). Pigs, Cinderella, and social class. *The NERA Journal*, *43*(2), 23–29.
- Street, B. V. (1984). *Literacy in theory and practice*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Tatum, A. (2008). Toward a more anatomically complete model of literacy instruction: A focus on African American male adolescents and texts. *Harvard Educational Review*, *78*, 155–188.
- West, J. B. (2010). *Gender bias and stereotypes in young adult literature: A content analysis of novels for middle school students*. Retrieved from [http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/ref/collection/s\\_papers/id/1263](http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/ref/collection/s_papers/id/1263).
- Young Adult Library Services Association. (n.d.). The Michael L. Printz Award for excellence in young adult literature. Retrieved from [www.ala.org/yalsa/printz](http://www.ala.org/yalsa/printz).

## Young Adult Literature Cited

- Avi. (2002). *Crispin: The cross of lead*. New York, NY: Hyperion.
- Applegate, K. (2012). *The one and only Ivan*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Bacigalupi, P. (2009). *Ship breaker*. New York, NY: Little, Brown.
- Bartoletti, S. C. (2001). *Black potatoes: The story of the great Irish famine*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin.
- Bass, H. (2009). *The secret world of Walter Anderson*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press.
- Blumberg, R. (2004). *York's adventures with Lewis and Clark: An African-American's part in the great expedition*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Bolden, T. (2007). *M.L.K.: Journey of a king*. New York, NY: Abrams Books for Children.
- Bray, L. (2009). *Going bovine*. New York, NY: Delacorte.
- Bridges, R., & Lundell, M. (1999). *Through my eyes*. New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Chambers, A. (2002). *Postcards from no man's land*. New York, NY: Dutton Books.
- Curtis, C. (1999). *Bud, not Buddy*. New York, NY: Delacorte Books for Young Readers.
- DiCamillo, K. (2006). *The tale of Despereaux: Being the story of a mouse, a princess, some soup, and spool of thread*. New York: Candlewick.
- Freedman, R. (2005). *Children of the great depression*. New York, NY: Clarion Books.
- Gaimon, N. (2008). *The graveyard book*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Gantos, J. (2011). *Dead end in Norvelt*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Green, J. (2005). *Looking for Alaska*. New York, NY: Speak.
- Greenberg, J., & Jordan, S. (2010). *Ballet for Martha: Making Appalachian spring*. New York, NY: Roaring Brook Press.
- Johnson, A. (2003). *The first part last*. New York, NY: Simon &

- Schuster Books for Young Readers.
- Kadohato, C. (2004). *Kira-kira*. New York, NY: Atheneum Books for Young Readers.
- Lake, N. (2012). *In darkness*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury.
- Marchetta, M. (2008). *Jellicoe road*. New York, NY: HarperTeen.
- McCaughrean, G. (2005). *The White darkness*. New York, NY: HarperTeen.
- Montgomery, S. (2006). *Quest for the tree kangaroo: An expedition to the Cloud Forest of New Guinea*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin.
- Murphy, J. (2003). *An American plague: The true and terrifying story of the yellow fever epidemic of 1793*. New York, NY: Clarion Books.
- Myers, W. D. (1999). *Monster*. New York, NY: HarperTeen.
- Na, A. (2001). *A step from heaven*. New York, NY: Front Street.
- Patron, S. (2007). *The higher power of Lucky*. New York, NY: Atheneum Books for Young Readers.
- Peck, R. (2000). *A year down yonder*. New York, NY: Dial Books for Young Readers.
- Perkins, L. R. (2007). *Criss cross*. New York, NY: Greenwillow Books.
- Rosoff, M. (2004). *How I live now*. NY: Wendy Lamb Books.
- Ryan, P. M. (2002). *When Marian sang: The true recital of Marian Anderson: The voice of a century*. New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Schlitz, L. A. (2007). *Good masters! Sweet ladies!: Voice from a medieval village*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press.
- Schubert, L. (2012). *Actors without words: Monsieur Marceau*. New York, NY: Flash Point.
- Stanley, J. (2000). *Hurry freedom: African Americans in gold rush California*. New York, NY: Crown.
- Sweet M. (2011). *Balloons over Broadway: The true story of the puppeteer of Macy's parade*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Books for Children.
- Tanaka, S. (2008). *Amelia Earhart: The legend of the lost aviator*. New York, NY: Abrams Books for Young Readers.
- Vanderpool, C. (2010). *Moon over manifest*. New York, NY: Delacorte.
- Whaley, J. C. (2011). *Where things come back*. New York, NY: Atheneum Books for Young Readers.
- Yang, G. L. (2006). *American born Chinese*. New York, NY: Square Fish.

## 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



## Reading YA with “Dark Brown Skin”:

Race, Community, and Rue’s Uprising

She has dark brown skin and eyes, but other than that, she’s very like Prim in size and demeanor.

—Collins, 2008

**T**here aren’t many sentences in contemporary young adult literature (YAL) more understated and without *action* than Katniss Everdeen’s description of Rue, a fellow entrant in the 74th Annual Hunger Games. However, this single sentence and its clear signal of a young girl with “dark brown skin” illustrate the growing ecology of YAL and racial politics in the 21st century. With fans of the book both upholding the revolutionary potential of Rue and deriding the choice of a Black actress to play her in the film version, it is necessary to recognize that YAL and discussions of the genre encompass far more than simply the words on the page, particularly given their extension to digital forms and other media.

The extensions we see in YAL reflect pervasive cultural shifts that have been happening to myriad forms of media over the last few decades. “Participatory culture” allows people to interact much more as producers rather than simply consumers of media. As noted by Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, & Weigel (2009), “Participatory culture is emerging as the culture absorbs and responds to the explosion of new media technologies that make it possible for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways” (p. 8). From fan art posted and shared on teen Tumblr pages to discussions of popular books on YouTube and social networks and even to communication with authors on Twitter, participatory culture is a signifi-

cant factor impacting the world of YAL today. However, typical analyses of participatory culture are done without scrutiny of how these cultural shifts intersect with racial identity. In light of this absence, we want to highlight how digital tools mediate how discussions of race and civic agency are emerging around YAL.

In this article, we argue that transmedia and online fandom create rich ecologies (Brown, 2000) and sites of connected learning tied to YAL. Youth engage increasingly with YA titles through open, complex, adaptive systems (Brown, 2000) by which they make sense of their selves in relation to their environments in spaces that are more robust than what many school contexts offer. By allowing ideas and learning to emerge within the context of such systems, engagement with YAL shifts away from traditional learning to include production of complex multimodal products, fan-driven activism, and communities of peers that give meaningful feedback. The role of race and gendered identity is particularly important to consider in how characters are framed by authors, assumed by fans, and depicted in transmedia and online fandom; the interwoven ecology of production, interpretation, and remediation represents a lived part of youth fandom today. While new media is often assumed to be a liberating tool for diversifying representations of race and gender in YAL, it is also a space that can reify presuppositions about racial identity *even* when such assumptions are textually incorrect. In the realm

of online fandom, sometimes “dark brown skin” is still assumed to be White. Recognizing this, we look at how YAL acts as a portal for critical civic learning about race in today’s digital spaces. In looking at the changes in how youth engage and interact with YAL and with each other via interest in YAL, it is important to recognize that civic lessons about race and identity are *already* happening. As educators and researchers, these are not simply *opportunities* for learning; this is a critical shift with which YAL scholars and educators must grapple.

### **Transmedia, Fandom, and the Learning Ecologies of Today’s Young Adult Literature**

Participatory culture moves beyond the printed page to include actionable experiences vis-à-vis transmedia. A leading scholar of the emerging genre, Jenkins (2007) describes transmedia as “a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story.” Transmedia allow narratives to be ever-present in ways that mirror the constant feeds and buzzes that often update youth throughout the day. A classic transmedia text like the Matrix series (see Jenkins, 2006), for example, began as a blockbuster film but grew to include videogames, cartoons, comics, websites, and additional film installments. These were not retellings of the story of Neo but, instead, continuations and evolutions of the original. The 2003 video game *Enter the Matrix*, for example, centers much of the story on Niobe, a woman of color who, in the film franchise, takes an ancillary role to traditional White, male Hollywood stars. Though YAL is slowly embracing similar opportunities, students, as both consumers and producers within a YAL ecology of learning, must look at how the worlds of popular fiction encapsulate opportunities for racialized lessons of civic life, particularly the inclusion and exclusion of racialized voices and experiences. Whose voices *could* emerge in a transmedia world that zooms in on the other districts of Panem (*The Hunger Games*), for example? As educators, we must consider how transmedia allow new narrative points of view to emerge.

YAL-related examples of transmedia can be seen in the extended stories that provide readers new insights *between* the publication dates of titles in franchised series. The Lost Files, for example, provides additional exploration into the mysteries of the I Am Number Four franchise. With the tenth volume of The Lost Files due out in December 2014, these “extras” outnumber the original series volumes. Further, the series itself is one that invites online exploration. Purporting to have been written by Pittacus Lore—an alien—the book’s plethora of URLs and QR codes embedded on the covers and in backmatter encourage readers to extend their narrative engagement well beyond the pages of the books.

Similar to the extending possibilities of transmedia, we also would like to highlight the participatory nature of YAL with the proliferation of fan fiction. As of December 2014, there were more than 41 thousand separate fan fiction stories related to *The Hunger Games* posted on fanfiction.net (just one of numerous online fan fiction sites). While this number is a fraction of those of book juggernauts like Harry Potter and the Twilight series (more than 692,000 and 216,000 entries respectively), the number speaks to the many fans who are choosing to engage with a contemporary text beyond simply reading about, reviewing, or talking with friends about a book. In their recent edited collection, Hellekson and Busse (2014) outline six ways that fan fiction can be interpreted:

1. Fan fiction as interpretation of source text.
2. Fan fiction as a communal gesture.
3. Fan fiction as a sociopolitical argument.
4. Fan fiction as individual engagement and identificatory practice.
5. Fan fiction as one element of audience response.
6. Fan fiction as a pedagogical tool. (pages 8–9)

Looking at this list, we can see the powerful ways in which race and civic identity can be interwoven as important factors of fan fiction. *Whose* perspective is highlighted when the narrative is shifted in fan fiction? *Who owns* fan fiction, too, is an important question for readers to grapple with in today’s digital, capitalist landscape (see Grossman, 2011). In considering these questions, the participatory acts of producing, interpreting, and sharing fan fiction are civic acts: As an author, do you subvert the gendered and racialized assumptions about characters? If Harry Potter is Black

or if the dystopian world of *The Hunger Games* is actually occurring in present day urban Los Angeles, what do these newly authored texts say of equity for their readers?

We emphasize fan fiction and transmedia here not as disparate elements of participatory culture but as interconnected pieces addressing race in the YAL ecology. As Black (2005) notes, “It is not uncommon for authors to insert themselves into their fictions as characters that possess a mixture of idealized and authentic personality traits” (p. 123). Even with books that are marketed as containing predominantly White casts of characters, fan fiction functions as a liberatory tool for youth to insert themselves within a text, to render the mainstream text disrupted with one’s own civic act. With the success of Printz-nominated author Rainbow Rowell’s *Fangirl* (2013), the questions of ownership and legitimacy of fan fiction are being read and presented to mainstream YAL readers—pushing the genre beyond the already burgeoning legion of fan fiction producers.

Looking at the various ways that just two aspects of participatory culture—transmedia and fan fiction—are being taken up within YAL, the civic possibilities of YA texts for today’s “networked youth” (boyd, 2014) are significant. Likewise, as fan fiction communities signal how youth are already producing and learning *with* (not just from) YAL, the role for educators in these spaces must be considered. In particular, if these are the sites of authentic, voluntary learning for youth, how do we help guide students toward challenging questions of representation and participation? How is race enacted in transmedia examples? Fan fiction—both the reading and writing of it—provides a space that can liberate narratives from otherwise White perspectives.

Further, from a pedagogical standpoint, we can see these forms of participatory culture representing what researchers are recently labeling as “connected learning” (Ito et al., 2013). Looking at the intersection of academic, peer supported, and passion-focused engagement, connected learning is socially embedded, interest-driven, and oriented toward educational, economic, or political opportunity. Connected learning is realized when a young person pursues a personal interest or passion with the support of friends and caring adults and is, in turn, able to link this learning and interest to academic achievement, career possibilities,

or civic engagement (Ito et al., 2013). The environment in which youth are voluntarily learning—civically, socially, and academically—is, then, not a formal schooling environment. YAL speaks to youth interests and is the space in which learning is shaped and mediated. Recognizing this fact, it is useful to consider the proactive ways educators can help cultivate and shape the learning ecologies that emerge around youth interests today.

Expanding his definition of a “complex adaptive system,” Brown (2000) explains that one of the powerful factors that makes “an ecology so powerful and adaptable to new contexts is its diversity” (p. 19). Thinking of the large audiences that participate in fan fiction and connected learning around YAL, we can see popular books functioning as hubs for necessary discussions around racial politics. It is the YAL ecology around *The Hunger Games*, for instance, that allows readers to challenge the dominant narrative of Katniss as the revolutionary hero and bestow instead the title on Rue. As online fans have explained (Prismatic Bell, 2013), it is the death of Rue that instigates nationwide revolution in *The Hunger Games*, not the actions of Katniss. We’ll further explore this case in the next section, but we point to it here as an example of how a learning ecology can function as a space for readers to challenge and muster support for counter-narrative discussions of race within YAL.

Similar to the potential of Rue, Rachel Rostad’s viral spoken word poem, “To JK Rowling from Cho Chang” (2013), weaves nuanced insight from close readings of the Harry Potter series to question marginalization of the Chinese student noted in the poem’s title. The poem traces the lineage of Cho, the Chinese woman’s donning of a Korean name, and the perpetuation of stereotypes within a beloved series. And while Brown’s (2000) theoretical framing does not discuss racial diversity, per se, within a learning ecology,

---

**As educators, how do we engage and utilize the assets of participatory culture to bring in the diverse voices within our classrooms? How do we cultivate ecologies that embrace difference and challenge dominant narratives in YAL?**

---

it provides a helpful lens to consider; as educators, how do we engage and utilize the assets of participatory culture to bring in the diverse voices within our classrooms? How do we cultivate ecologies that embrace difference and challenge dominant narratives in YAL? As the comments section on the YouTube page for Rostad's poem highlights, it is difficult work. The top comment on the page is: "You simply can't do ANYTHING without some girl bitching about it." Two comments lower, we read:

Jesus this comes off as a bunch of whining. I cant tell if this is meant to be taken seriously or not. Is she seriously complaining about there not being enough diversity in a world that at one point existed in a single persons head? Its fiction bitch, and its pretty damn ungrateful considering they gave you a damn position in the movies. [sic]

These are the learning spaces with which our students frequently interact. Yes, Cho, like Rue, came from the fiction of a single author. However, as a foundation for a learning ecology, we must encourage entry into the texts and into fan communities as sites for civic engagement and racial exploration.

### **Online "Communities" and The Hunger Games**

Looking at the opportunities for enthusiasts of YAL noted in the previous section, we can imagine deep communities thriving in equally vibrant learning ecologies. The learning in this new and digital context is rich, peer supported, and *fun*. However, as researchers who are passionate about YAL as sites for critical engagement around topics like race, class, and gender, we are also careful to consider the ways these digital spaces may exclude and push against the agencies of many readers. As evidenced by the comments sections of pages like YouTube, as highlighted above, online spaces can be incendiary, offensive, and exclusionary. With this in mind, we wonder what counts as a "community" around YAL today? Who is included and excluded in public spaces like Tumblr pages, Twitter, or Facebook? With YAL as a fulcrum for rich, contextualized, connected learning ecologies, we want to illustrate how a singular text—in this case, *The Hunger Games*—plays a role in constructing civic identity for YAL readers.

Harkening back to the opening passage of this manuscript, the description of Rue is innocuous

enough, isn't it? She is a dark-skinned girl who tragically (and statistically likely as a participant in the 74th annual Hunger Games) dies near the midpoint of Collins's novel. And while we endorse an interpretation of Rue as a girl who is strong and young and Black and functions as the fulcrum of revolution in *The Hunger Games*, we are also very aware of how the public reacted to the casting of Rue by Black actress Amandla Stenberg. The article headline from the online site, Jezebel, states the case clearly: "Racist *Hunger Games* Fans Are Very Disappointed" (Stewart, 2012). *Hunger Games* fans used public spaces like Twitter and Facebook to voice strong reactions against the inclusion and representation of non-White characters in both the literature series and the film. The article shares images of tweets that stated, "Kk call me racist but when I found out rue was black her death wasn't as sad #ihatemyself [sic]" and "cinna and rue werent supposed to be black . . . why did the producer make all the good characters black smh [sic]." One tweet complaining about the race of Rue was followed by the hashtag #sticktothebookdude, apparently questioning the validity of casting a Black actress in the role of a girl with "dark brown skin."

The social media frenzy and outrage over Rue imagined as a young Black girl illustrates the racial limitations of many *Hunger Games* readers. It also speaks to the need for more diverse representations in YAL; there is a need for more stories, both fictional and nonfictional, that represent the experiences and histories of diverse peoples. Without these stories, YAL, and by extension film, perpetuate a fan "community" exclusively for its assumed White-dominant readership.

In a recent book chapter (Garcia & Haddix, 2014), we looked at how online fandom highlighted the revolutionary potential of Rue in *The Hunger Games*. Recall, briefly, that in the novel (and film adaptation), Katniss's life is spared by Thresh; he does not kill her because she tried to protect and actively mourned the death of Rue. In one viral meme around the incident, several fans discussed how this pivotal moment in the book reframes power and race in Collins's trilogy: "The revolution really doesn't start with Katniss. It starts with Rue," writes one individual in a post shared more than 300,000 times by Tumblr users alone (Prismatic Bell, 2013). For those who embraced the powerful lessons of Rue as an empowered, Black,

female revolutionary, *The Hunger Games* is a book all too misunderstood in having Katniss paraded as the leader of a movement she inherits from her fallen comrade. Clearly, the civic lessons of YAL can be shared, reframed, and *taught* by and to fans. And while we will later contrast the powerful civic agency exuded by youth of color with racist online responses to the film adaptation of *The Hunger Games*, we believe that the digital spaces of YAL are expansive ecologies for racial and civic learning.

In her blogpost, “‘Why Is Rue a Little Black Girl?’ The Problem of Innocence in the Dark Fantastic,” YAL scholar Ebony Thomas (2014) writes,

I am just at the beginning of this side of my work, but after more than 15 years of teaching, writing, and interacting online and in various fandoms, I have found a few things to be true. One of them is the dire consequences that a person of color—or even *a character of color*—faces when he or she steps outside of his or her assigned place, or flips the script in any way.

In this case, even when Collins clearly describes the racial features of her characters, the characters’ non-Whiteness poses a threat to the overall credibility of the text and, by extension, the transmediation of the text to film. As Thomas goes on to say, “When Collins’ Panem was transmediated from page to screen, young Amandla Stenberg and her costars were targets of this threat. The idea of Rue as the slain mockingjay—the symbol of purity and innocence—was likely strange, even alien, to some young readers conditioned by the scripts of our society.”

Thomas ends her post by arguing that if we do not want YAL readers to automatically assume that Rue is White despite Collins’s direct statement otherwise, we must have conversations about the online tweets and fandom that suggest racism is still alive and well. There are ecologies where racist ideologies are circulating and being reproduced without mediation. If we are to move toward a society that is socially just and inclusive of racial diversity, classrooms must become spaces for the uncomfortable yet necessary conversations about why Rue is expected to be White and why it is considered incredible for her to be otherwise.

In looking at these considerations for participating and entering into a community, we wonder how discussions of race in YAL ecologies invite and exclude participants. The National Council of Teachers of

English’s 2014 “Statement on Anti-Racism to Support Teaching and Learning” recommends that all English language arts educators “actively identify and challenge individual or systemic acts of racism, bias, and prejudice in educational institutions and within our profession, exposing such acts through external communication and publications.” In her teacher preparation courses, Marcelle urges her students to unpack their assumptions and beliefs prior to entering school communities for observation, student teaching, and careers as educators, posing such questions as:

- How do you understand the position and role of people from this community?
- What do you bring to this community?
- What do you take from this community?
- How do we develop communities that honor the “funds of knowledge” of the community members?
- How do you critically and purposefully engage in questioning who you are by addressing any assumptions you might have of people and communities that are different from you and from what you know?

With this in mind, we are preparing and supporting educators to create classroom spaces where teachers and students actively study, question, critique, and work against dominant oppressive structures (NCTE, 2014). This work, though, takes a new turn when we consider the ways racism persists within online fan communities. The assumed anonymity of such spaces permits its members to voice and enact racist ideologies in ways that one might hesitate to do in physical spaces. Questions like the ones above can be adapted to encourage YAL readers to think critically about their role and participation in online fan communities and consider how they maintain or work against racism in such spaces. Specifically, we must reveal and address the assumptions we have about members of these spaces and our relationship to them. For exam-

---

**Questions like the ones listed can be adapted to encourage YAL readers to think critically about their role and participation in online fan communities and consider how they maintain or work against racism in such spaces.**

---

ple, how might *Hunger Games* fans' public reactions to the casting of Rue as a young Black girl on online spaces like Twitter have been different if these fans acknowledged the diverse racial makeup of these community spaces? Would fans still freely voice racist and

---

**We are cautiously optimistic that pedagogical instruction that interprets YAL as *more than text* can be done so deliberately in an effort to shore up discussions of race and highlight student voice as a civic action.**

---

exclusionary ideas if they believed and imagined other YAL readers to be of a race different from their own? Expanded notions of community to include online spaces necessitate that educators create classroom opportunities where students develop voice and agency to participate in new public discourses in anti-racist ways.

Further, we must consider the imperative role that teachers play in the critical anti-racist work that diverse YAL ecologies demand. Educators must

prod youth to consider challenging the questions we frame above. Even when the answers are difficult ones for us to acknowledge, the spaces for empowerment are felt when we can identify the problematic absences in our communities, our texts, our ecologies. Further, in helping youth look at how texts (and the ecologies they support) are or are not founded on diverse principles, teachers play a vital role in helping students break the stereotypes of who can be seen as a sophisticated reader.

### **The Racial Politics of Fandom: Portals for Civic Learning**

In looking at the previous section's considerations for participating and entering into a community, we wonder how discussions of race in YAL ecologies invite and exclude participants and how assumptions of Whiteness are mapped onto YAL readership. This raises two questions: First, does the discussion of race in YAL push against the socialized norms of various online communities? Second, does *being* a YAL fan of color challenge traditional norms of participation in these spaces? We are cautiously optimistic that peda-

gogical instruction that interprets YAL as *more than text* can be done so deliberately in an effort to shore up discussions of race and highlight student voice as a civic action. We can imagine the possibilities that emerge from bridging classroom and online communities in efforts to unpack issues of race and civic life.

The proliferation of online communities that dialogue about literature, engage with authors, and publish fan fiction means that fan communities are "geeking out" (Ito, 2009) more than ever before. In this sense, the power of participatory media like fan websites, social networks, and Twitter help connect enthusiastic readers. Further, these opportunities highlight the role YAL can play in supporting the civic identity of readers. In this light, being a fan of the work of, say, John Green means not simply reading his books. It is, instead, a portal into conversing with Green on Twitter and Tumblr, watching his various YouTube videos, and sharing in a smattering of online dialogue and new fiction inspired by the worlds of adolescence in his books. Green's efforts to "fight world suck" (vlogbrothers, 2009) by becoming "Nerd-fighters" allow his readers to take on real-world issues as a result of initial literature-focused fandom.

Similarly, the Harry Potter Alliance and Odds in Our Favor are two online networks that leverage fandom for social good. Under the guise of joining the fictitious group of revolutionaries, Dumbledore's Army, the Harry Potter Alliance has taken on numerous challenges of eliminating "real-life" horcruxes, including challenging perceptions of body image and illiteracy. Likewise, using a familiar catchphrase from *The Hunger Games*, Odds in Our Favor (2014) is a similar project (created by the Harry Potter Alliance) that addresses and confronts systemic inequality across the globe. By planning, interacting, and publicizing their efforts, YA fans can transfer the heroic actions of their favorite characters in *The Hunger Games* into real-life civic deeds. The classroom for civic learning, then, is not the 12<sup>th</sup>-grade class students may daydream throughout, but a meaningful, participatory space found both online and off.

While the potential for civic learning through YAL is exciting, we also must wonder who participates in these spaces? Who is welcomed? Visiting Oddsinourfavor.org in July 2014, we are greeted with a grid of participants' faces—"selfies" that reflect a form of popular literacy performance today. Though there is a

balance of gender representation, the majority of these fans are White, perhaps alluding to the “participation gap” (Jenkins et al., 2009) frequently found in online media. Just as we must problematize the representation of race *within* YAL, we must also question the politics of representation when looking at YAL as platforms for participation. Though not explicit in denying membership, a quick visual cue of membership at Odds in Our Favor—like the covers of the vast majority of contemporary YA novels—implies that this is a community for primarily White youth. It also supports and furthers a deficit framing of non-White youth as being non-readers and disengaged from this participatory literacy culture.

In essence, the damaging implication is that if non-Whites do not participate, it is because they do not want to, they simply can’t, or they aren’t able. This, too, acts as a lesson in how transmedia furthers the challenges of representation within and around YAL. If a large enough YAL readership (consciously or unconsciously) negates the race of a central character like Rue—to the extent that it leads to racist tweets—we can see the pervasive role that White privilege plays even in the civic fandom that emerges around these texts. It is not enough for a space like Odds in Our Favor to exist if the odds are never in the favor of participants who are not White. Academic settings can bring these issues to the fore. Beyond lessons that focus on literacy development and literary analysis, it is incumbent upon teachers to prompt students to acknowledge, question, and understand the pervasive nature of White privilege and its impact on the interpretations of YAL texts like *The Hunger Games*.

## Conclusion

The world of YAL is clearly in a state of flux: the texts themselves are larger than merely the encapsulation of plot as derived from authors. Instead, these books are the bedrock of ecologies of engaged fandom in which participants communicate with one another; *The Hunger Games*, for example, is the foundation for broader dialogue and production for its fans. As such, these texts necessitate the consideration of the communities they naturally support. While interest in a specific book, author, or genre may lead to participation within the text-created communities, we also argue that such new spaces can be inherently

exclusionary. In particular, the role of racial politics can cloud how books are interpreted (in the case of the powerful counter-narrative of Rue as the true hero of Collins’s novel), how others’ interpretations are critiqued (in the case of Rostad’s “To JK Rowling from Cho Chang”), and who gets to participate. That’s a lot of change happening to a genre that educators may feel they already grasp. As a field of educators, we must acknowledge that it is no longer enough to challenge and lecture about racial politics in young adult literature in academic settings. As Brown (2000) explains, we are in the midst of “a shift [from] using technology to support the individual to using technology to support relationships between individuals. With that shift, we will discover new tools and social protocols for helping us help each other, which is the very essence of social learning” (p. 20). We must explore, interact, and produce within the ecologies built upon popular YA texts.

Further, with YAL functioning within rich learning ecologies, the opportunities for critical dialogue to emerge are ever-present. The capacity of participants on social networks and of educators to build critical engagement and to challenge troubling perspectives related to race and representation in YAL is more important than ever before. We believe in supporting youth in developing critical consciousness through the engagement of fan communities. Questioning who is present in these communities and in the textual platforms on which they are situated is a necessary and constantly needed practice.

As we mentioned earlier, this critical engagement with complex nuances of texts, potentially exclusionary spaces, and online racist responses is already how YA texts are being encountered. As educators, the question of where and when to engage in critical dialogue around YAL is moot. However, we must also engage in and explore these online spaces alongside our

---

**The capacity of participants on social networks and of educators to build critical engagement and to challenge troubling perspectives related to race and representation in YAL is more important than ever before.**

---

students. While we can bridge this work into classroom discourse, we must also traverse the “messy” space of online fandom to explore how various civic and racial identities are celebrated and challenged (and often both).

The racist responses to the casting of Ms. Stenberg as Rue in *The Hunger Games* film adaptation are neither surprising nor out of the ordinary. Only months later, similar backlash emerged when African American actor Michael Jordan was announced for the role of the Human Torch in the latest *Fantastic Four* adaptation. Likewise, when Quvenzhané Wallis was cast in the most recent adaptation of the musical *Annie*, online racist response reached its typical fervor. Producing counter-narratives and challenging racial assumptions on YAL platforms such as The Hunger Games franchise is a civic responsibility. It is about more than surface-level reading and analysis; it is about helping our youth see their own “dark brown skin and eyes” reflected in the books and communities they inhabit.

**Antero Garcia** is an assistant professor in the English Department at Colorado State University. His research focuses on developing critical literacies and civic identity through the use of participatory media and gameplay in formal learning environments. Among Antero’s publications are the recent books *Critical Foundations in Young Adult Literature: Challenging Genres* (Sense, 2013) and *Teaching in the Connected Learning Classroom (Digital Media Hub, 2014)*.

**Marcelle Haddix** is a Dean’s associate professor and program director of English Education at Syracuse University. She also directs *Writing Our Lives*, a program geared toward supporting the writing practices of urban youth. Her publications are featured in *Research in the Teaching of English*, *English Education*, and *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*.

## References

- Black, R. (2005). Access and affiliation: The literacy and composition practices of English-language learners in an online fanfiction community. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 49, pp 118–128.
- boyd, d. (2014). *It’s complicated: The social lives of networked teens*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Brown, J. S. (2000). Growing up digital: How the web changes work, education, and the ways people learn. *Change*, 32(1), 10–20.
- Collins, S. (2008). *The hunger games*. New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Garcia, A., & Haddix, M. (2014). The revolution starts with Rue: Online fandom and the racial politics of *The Hunger Games*. In S. P. Connors (Ed.), *The politics of Panem: Challenging genres* (pp. 213–217). Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense.
- Grossman, L. (2011). The boy who lived forever. *Time*, 178(3), 44–50. Retrieved from <http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,2081784,00.html>.
- Hellekson, K., & Busse, K. (2014). *The fan fiction studies reader*. Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press.
- Ito, M. (2009). *Hanging out, messing around, and geeking out: Kids living and learning with new media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Ito, M., Gutierrez, K., Livingstone, S., Penuel, B., Rhodes, J., Salen, K., . . . Watakins, S. C. (2013). *Connected learning: An agenda for research and design*. Report for Connected Learning Research Network. Retrieved from [http://dmlhub.net/sites/default/files/ConnectedLearning\\_report.pdf](http://dmlhub.net/sites/default/files/ConnectedLearning_report.pdf).
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York, NY: New York UP.
- Jenkins, H. (2007). Transmedia storytelling 101 [Confessions of an aca-fan: The official weblog of Henry Jenkins]. Retrieved from [http://henryjenkins.org/2007/03/transmedia\\_storytelling\\_101.html](http://henryjenkins.org/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html).
- Jenkins, H., Clinton, K., Purushotma, R., Robison, A. J., & Weigel, M. (2009). *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture: Media education for the 21st century*. Chicago, IL: MacArthur Foundation.
- National Council of Teachers of English. (2014). *Statement on anti-racism to support teaching and learning*. Urbana, IL: NCTE. Retrieved from <http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/antiracisminteaching>.
- Odds in Our Favor. (2014). Retrieved from <http://oddsinourfavor.org/>.
- Prismatic Bell. (2013). Can we just stop and talk about this for a minute? [Blog post]. Retrieved from <http://prismatic-bell.tumblr.com/post/69343374028/can-we-just-stop-and-talk-about-this-for-a>.
- Rostad, R. (2013). To JK Rowling, from Cho Chang [YouTube video]. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iFPWwx96Kew>.
- Rowell, R. (2013). *Fangirl*. New York, NY: St. Martin’s Griffin.
- Stewart, D. (2012). Racist *Hunger Games* fans are very disappointed [Blog post]. Retrieved from <http://jezebel.com/5896408/racist-hunger-games-fans-dont-care-how-much-money-the-movie-made/all>.
- Thomas, E. E. (2014). “Why is Rue a little black girl?”—The problem of innocence in the dark *Fantastic* [Web log message on *The Dark Fantastic*]. Retrieved from <http://thedarkfantastic.blogspot.com/2014/07/why-is-rue-little-black-girl-problem-of.html>.
- vlogbrothers. (2009). How to be a nerdfighter: A vlogbrothers FAQ [YouTube video]. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FyQi79aYfxU>.



## Felt Tensions:

Preservice Teachers Read Sherman Alexie's *An Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*

**A**s a teacher educator, I am continually reminded of the differences among my English Education students. Though predominantly White, they bring varied histories and purposes to my classes and come from diverse environments—from small towns and big cities, from poverty and wealth, and from families with post-secondary school experience and families without. I meet them at different stages in their lives—some right out of high school, some parenting children while returning to their education, and some teaching in schools and ready for more specialized training. I remind my students of the endless differences they will encounter in their classrooms: in abilities, interests, ethnicities, home lives, relationships to school, language, gender identification, religion, sexuality, literacy, self-awareness, environment, and others.

In my Young Adult Literature course, I encourage students to wonder about those future students as readers. What existing literacies, knowledges, and identities will those students bring with them to their acts of reading (Bomer, 2011)? Furthermore, I try to illuminate my belief that the practice of reading literature can teach us to develop the flexibility to revise our thinking—our interpretations of texts, yes, and even our points of view (Blau, 2003). In other words, reading literature allows us to continue to revise what we know about the world, especially when we encounter literature from different points of view, including those that contradict our own (Blau, 2003).

For this reason (among others), I teach and hope my students will teach multicultural young adult lit-

erature, broadly defined as literature that “represent[s] voices typically omitted from the traditional canon” (Glazier & Seo, 2005, p. 686). Indeed, Grobman (2007) argues that multiculturalism “acknowledge[s] . . . exclusions based on gender, class, sexual orientation, disability, and other categories of differences” (p. xviii), ultimately expanding readers’ overall understanding of historical and systemic oppression. In my course, I choose young adult texts that not only highlight marginalized voices, but that give students windows into “institutional structures that have caused and continue to contribute to social inequities” (Athanasos, 1996, p. 250), my hope being that all students meet characters they recognize and characters who deeply challenge what they may believe to be true. I have found that those challenges appear through expressions of frustration, confusion, and disagreement; it is those expressions of difficulty that concern me here.

Extending Grobman’s broad recognition of multiculturalism, Trites (2003) characterizes multiculturalism as a “process,” one “that includes in different measures conflict, accommodation, isolation, and awareness” (p. 67), a list analogous to, in many ways, the various responses readers experience while reading texts that counter their perspectives, whatever those perspectives may be. It is the move from “conflict” to “awareness” that interests me most, so what I hope to emphasize in this article is the underlying importance of students’ “conflicts.”

During a recent experience teaching my university’s Young Adult Literature course, I became interested in

the ways in which readers experience and share conflicts between their own worlds and the world of the text, as well as their willingness and/or resistance to revise their own perspectives. I became most aware of my students' conflicts during our reading of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Alexie, 2007). My reflection on teaching this novel has been driven by an overarching question: How do we teach students to reflect on the conflicts, or emotional tensions, that emerge while reading multicultural literature?

## Background

### Perspective Taking as Intellectual Generosity

Thein, Beach, and Parks (2007) have argued that, though teachers typically want students' experiences reading multicultural literature to broaden and shift their understanding of the world, the reality is that "significant changes in beliefs and attitudes are rare and happen slowly, over the course of many years" (p. 55). In their study of a multiethnic high school class reading Dorothy Alison's *Bastard out of Carolina* (which they define as a multicultural text because of its representation of historical oppression, in this case that of a rural, working, poor, White community), they found that the text "created tensions" for many students and that negotiating these tensions produced a willingness to "consider a new perspective" (Thein, Beach, & Parks, 2007, p. 57). Perspective taking, they explain, begins with the "tensions" readers experience "between the beliefs and perspective they bring with them from their experiences and those they meet with in text worlds" (Thein, Beach, & Parks, 2007, p. 55). Those tensions can initiate a series of valuable and worthwhile reflections: readers become more aware of their own points of view; they may try on other points of view or at least consider why those perspectives differ from their own; and they may experience changes in outlook, changes "that are often subtle, usually transitory, and frequently contradictory," yet still "increase their understanding of *how* their beliefs and values are formed

and *why* other people think differently" (Thein, Beach, & Parks, 2007, p. 55).

Perspective taking both builds and displays what Blau (2003) labels as "intellectual generosity and fallibilism," or a "willingness to change one's mind, to appreciate alternative visions," ultimately leading readers "to be changed . . . in the ways they apprehend or construct themselves" (p. 214). Blau (2003) posits intellectual generosity as a key ingredient to becoming a rich academic reader, but he acknowledges that this attribute is not nurtured by the culture of schooling, where getting it "right" supersedes achieving multiple ways of reading a text and where students, as Guillory (2012) has noted in her efforts to challenge students to identify and critique their own assumptions, "are largely unaccustomed to pedagogical spaces where dissonance is encouraged" (p. 12).

### Why Perspective Taking Matters

"This book made me feel like I was becoming racist," announced one of my students during the beginning of our discussion of Alexie's novel. Several others agreed—they didn't know alcoholism was such an issue for Native American communities, for example, and by the end of the book, they just wanted Junior to get out of the reservation and away from the tribe. I remember my worry at hearing these responses. How could my students not recognize the important role of the tribe in Junior's life despite the pain and suffering he witnesses on the reservation? And how would they ever teach challenging multicultural literature if they couldn't articulate this complexity?

As Blau indicates, there are more than academic consequences for failing to produce students who are willing to revise their stances; a "conviction of certainty" often reveals "ignorance" and an "incapacity to learn" (Blau, 2003, p. 213). Ultimately, intellectual generosity creates readers whose experiences with texts help them perceive that their version of reality is only one of many, that history and systemic oppression shape individual and group identities (Athanases, 1996; Dudek, 2011), and that between all people exist both "difference and common ground" (Athanases, 1996, p. 250). But how do we get to a place where these realizations mobilize our readings?

As I will argue through my analysis of two students' work reading *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, we need to prepare teachers to

---

**We need to prepare teachers to recognize and value those initial tensions between their outlooks and those of the characters in the textual world.**

---

recognize and value those initial tensions between their outlooks and those of the characters in the textual world, which means teaching preservice teachers and ourselves to identify the potential usefulness in discomfort, defensiveness, or confusion. Salvatori and Donahue (2005) identify difficulty as the source of our most meaningful moves as readers—marking the moments when interpretation is most relevant, most needed, and perhaps most able to transform our experiences with texts. As I came to see through teaching Alexie’s novel, those moments of discomfort, rejection, and worry (such as my student worrying she was becoming a racist) reveal the tensions that can motivate perspective taking. They are moments to utilize and return to, if we can, even though they are moments we may want to avoid. What is critical, in other words, is how readers take advantage of those conflicts or the tensions they experience while reading. They are the “seeds” of critical readings of self and text (Cai, 2008, p. 216), readings that we ultimately want for our students.

## Methods

### Students

During a recent semester at the university where I teach (a public university in rural Pennsylvania), all nine of my Young Adult Literature students were White women (as am I). Three of the nine students were graduate students, including two practicing special education teachers and one literature student preparing to pursue doctoral study. Though the class is designed to prepare students for 7–12 teaching certification, at least one student did not plan to pursue certification.

### Course Design

Our Young Adult Literature course is offered as an English Education class with pedagogical content, but it is not designed to focus on literacy theory; rather, it serves to expose students to a wide variety of YA literature and offer them rationales and strategies for teaching this literature to middle and secondary students. Because the class serves multiple purposes, it attracts a wide range of students, which creates both interest and challenge for the students and the teacher. Given the class’s uneven knowledge of literacy (some students had not yet taken our Teaching of Reading course, for example), I designed the course

to be an inductive approach to what it means to read literature. Students kept a reading notebook, and each week, this notebook took on a different form, each designed to help students think about what it means to isolate moments of significance in the text, construct meaning, and entertain interpretive possibilities (Blau, 2003).

We began with the dialogic journal (a two-column form, one column labeled “quotations” and the other “responses”), and throughout the semester, I provided other spin-offs of this journal form—typically two- or three-column organizers that pushed readers to pay attention to their reading in different ways. For example, one form asked students to collect quotations, their own emotional responses, and their reflections on those responses. Beyond helping students develop their own abilities to isolate significance, construct meaning, and develop multiple interpretations, the forms were also meant to give students possibilities to teach their future classroom readers beyond teacher-centered, text-dependent questions (a major proponent of the Common Core State Standards). Each form put readers, not me, in charge of what was noticed; yet by assigning new forms, I had the ability to shift our lens depending on the text we were reading.

Students then began to create their own journal forms, at first designed with a focus I assigned. For our reading of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, I asked students to first read Thein, Beach, and Parks’s article on perspective taking and then use those ideas to design a reading notebook form for Alexie’s novel that encouraged readers to take on perspectives within the textual world. Thus, students were designing a form with future students in mind, working through the journal form themselves, and then reflecting on its usefulness: where did it direct their attention, and what did it allow them to do as readers?

Throughout the course, I wanted students to notice in particular how they responded to nondomi-

---

**I wanted students to notice in particular how they responded to non-dominant perspectives, especially perspectives that might challenge their preconceived notions of the world.**

---

nant perspectives, especially perspectives that might challenge their preconceived notions of the world. Ultimately, I hoped through our reading of multicultural young adult literature, students would acknowledge difference in viewpoint; seek to understand perspectives that differ from their own, particularly those that trouble them in some way; and imagine how they might teach students how to adopt other perspectives so that they ultimately, to quote Dudek's (2011) definition of the goals of multicultural children's literature, "emerge with a stronger understanding and respect for cultural differences and the effect they have on individual and group identities" (p. 155).

I chose Alexie's novel for a variety of reasons. I anticipated it would challenge some students with an ethnically unfamiliar perspective and also provide common ground in terms of Junior's experiences with poverty, addiction, violence, and educational change. Furthermore, based on my experience recommending this book to high school students, I know that readers (including myself) find Junior to be a compelling, believable, and likeable narrator. Junior is, in many ways, the classic YA protagonist—an outsider. He was born with hydrocephalus, a condition defined by abnormal amounts of fluid in the brain that requires early surgeries and leaves Junior with physical abnormalities. He is a small kid with a big head and too many teeth who stutters and lisps. As Junior says, he is a "zero on the rez" (Alexie, 2007, p. 16), which means he is often the target of bullies.

Yet, despite Junior's very serious worries in life (his anxiety at being bullied, his well-intentioned father's alcoholism, his incredibly intelligent sister's stagnation, and the loss he has experienced and continues to experience), he finds ways to enjoy himself. He loves to draw, read, and play with his friend, Rowdy, and he wants a life to look forward to. Within his world on the Spokane Indian Reservation, however, he struggles to imagine a desirable future. Thus, though he knows he will be stereotyped and bullied by those in the more privileged, White community, and though he is aware of how his tribe will feel betrayed, he decides to pursue his education at the nearby White community's high school.

Despite the difficulty of leaving the reservation each morning and experiencing blatant racism when he arrives, Junior gains opportunities—and hope—when he switches schools. Thus, to further his

education and imagine possibilities for adulthood he doesn't see on the reservation, he has to join the historical oppressors. As a former public school teacher and a current educator at a public university, I must ask, *How many students in America feel this way?* As Barcott (2007) says in the *New York Times*, this book deals with the "grinding plates" between American Indian and White culture: is it possible, the book asks, to leave the sadness of your home and not betray who you are? Students of all backgrounds can identify with Junior's struggles to find hope, deal with loss, and negotiate his identity. Yet, he also brings to his interactions an acute awareness of systems of power that help construct his identity as an American Indian. It was those cultural specifics I wanted students to face (Grobman, 2007).

### Data Sources and Analysis

In order to gather data, I collected each student's reading notebook at the end of the course. By this point, students' notebooks contained nine different journal responses for a variety of multicultural texts they had read. Five of these dialogic journal forms were assigned by me, and four were created by students individually. Furthermore, throughout the course, I kept an informal journal in which I noted and reflected on significant moments during class discussions. My analysis focused heavily on the class's reading of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* because this was the book that provoked the most conflicted responses from students. I wanted to return to this group's experience with the novel in order to notice how students' conflicts with the world of the text manifested in their writing and their talking, to think through how students did or did not reflect on those conflicts, and to consider what pedagogical moves might encourage more productive reflection. Thus, I began by analyzing all students' journal entries on Alexie's novel. To analyze these journal entries, I reread them with the overarching lens of perspective taking, broken down into the following questions: Did students allow for expression of conflicts in their journal forms? If so, what were these conflicts, and how were they expressed? Did students reflect on those conflicts? If so, how and what did those reflections produce? Finally, if they attempted to do so, were students able to articulate a perspective other than their own?

For several reasons, I decided to focus further analysis on the case studies of Anna and Lynn (pseudonyms), two graduate students and special education teachers taking the course as an elective for their MA in literacy. First, both made their conflicts explicit in their notebook entries (some students referred to conflict with the text in their reflections or during class discussion, for example, but then mentioned them only subtly in their notebook entries). Second, Anna and Lynn responded to their conflicts in direct contrast to each other. Lynn used her conflict to identify a perspective she struggled to understand and began to employ perspective taking as a literacy practice. Anna, on the other hand, remained rooted in her perspective as “right” and made no attempt to try on the different perspectives of the textual world. Finally, the contrast between their responses allowed me to more deeply consider what approaches and aptitudes might undergird a reader’s ability to reflect on conflicts with a textual world and, in turn, what approaches and aptitudes might deter such reflection. As I continued to analyze Anna’s and Lynn’s journal forms, I added an additional question about how they approached the act of reading literature. To think through this question, I attended to how they designed their journal form and how they described their actions as readers.

To address further pedagogical implications, I returned to my notes on our class discussion of the book, which was limited to one two-and-a-half-hour class period. Given that I did not have a recorded and transcribed discussion, this component of my analysis was limited to my written impressions and reflections at the time of teaching. In analyzing these reflections, I was most interested in identifying when students expressed their conflicts and the pedagogical moves I made that invited, highlighted, or responded to those conflicts.

## Findings

### Perspective Taking in a Complex World

#### READING NOTEBOOK ONE, LYNN: USING ANGER

Lynn used Thein, Beach, and Parks’s article to set up a three-column notebook that allowed her to focus on a single character perspective unlike her own (see Table 1). The first column included “character descriptions: thoughts, feelings, beliefs, desires” and was captured both in quotations and descriptions.

The second column, titled “Response to Character,” asked for the reader’s “inferences about their perspective,” yet Lynn used it to recognize tensions between her perspective and those presented in the book, most specifically her dismay at the tribe’s reaction to Junior’s choice to go to the nearby White school. (To better capture how Lynn used this column, one possible label might be, “*Confusion and Tension: Where do I struggle to understand perspectives in the book? What bothers me and why?*”) In the third column, Lynn worked most closely with the idea of perspective taking, naming this column “How? and Why?” Here, she thinks about how her own beliefs and values are formed and accounts for differences between her world and the textual world.

Lynn identified tensions between her own world and the textual world through anger; in fact, her anger

**Table 1.** Sample entry from Lynn’s journal

<b>Character Descriptions</b> <i>Thoughts, feelings, beliefs, desires . . .</i>	<b>Response to Character</b> <i>Inferences about their perspective . . .</i>	<b>How? + Why?</b> <i>How are your beliefs/values formed? Why do other people think differently?</i>
Gordy showed Junior a good book and he read a play and read, “What greater grief than the loss of one’s native land?” He read this and thought, “Well, of course, man. We Indians have LOST EVERYTHING. We lost our native land, we lost our languages, we lost our songs and dances. We lost each other.”	He listened to his teacher and told his parents he wanted to transfer. I thought this would be a bigger ordeal to his immediate family. I didn’t think about the other people in his tribe and how they would feel. That was a point where cultural differences were apparent. They viewed it as Junior being a traitor and that he didn’t want to be Indian. Later, after the death of his grandmother, I realized how much the tribe was connected. Even with the drinking, fighting, and gambling, they were all a group.	When I assumed that the tribe would not be affected by Junior leaving the tribe, I was wrong. I forget where I read this quote but it said, “You change the tribe and the tribe changes you.” I could be off by a few words, but it is very true in this culture. And Rowdy describes Junior as a nomad Indian. How Indians used to be. Now they are not the same. They have lost so much that they only know how to lose. I think others get their views just like I did. I think so much like my mother. I think Junior is much like his family. He receives guidance from all of them in some way. I think that is how and why we think differently. We all grow in different environments and are nurtured differently.

and surprise at the tribe’s response helped her realize what she had not anticipated and thus overlooked: “the other people in his tribe and how they would feel.” By investigating her anger, she uncovered a missing piece to her own understanding—she didn’t recognize the significance of Junior’s actions from the perspective of the tribe. To that end, she struggled to understand what it meant to be a member of the tribe living on the Spokane reservation. In her reflection, Lynn explained that she felt the form helped her “evaluate the tribe and why they viewed Junior leaving as such an act of betrayal.” She goes on: “I was angry with them in the text. I wanted all of them to be happy for Junior.”

Experienced as anger, Lynn’s inability to predict the tribe’s response indicated a gap in her understanding of Junior and his identity as an American Indian. Lynn used the form to begin building that understanding, gaining an appreciation for how the tribe functions when Junior’s grandmother dies: “Later, after the death of his grandmother, I realized how much the tribe was connected. Even with the drinking, fighting, and gambling, they were all a group.” She also connects the tribe to group loss—the loss of

land, Grandmother Spirit’s death, the tribe’s collective mourning, and the theme of loss that haunts Junior. Her increased ability to understand and connect Junior’s contexts—his home, the Spokane tribe, and the historical realities of American Indians (loss of land, for example)—illustrate Lynn’s success trying to take on another perspective.

#### READING NOTEBOOK TWO, ANNA: MOVING BEYOND A CORRECT PERSPECTIVE

Anna’s reading notebook form noticeably failed to have readers take on new perspectives (see Table 2); instead, she adapted a dialogic journal form in order “to justify why Arnold was incorrect with his views on white people.” When we shared notebooks during our class discussion, Anna was immediately aware that her notebook entry didn’t take on new perspectives the way others did, and she confessed that she was not used to reading literature from a different ethnic perspective.

Her form emphasizes the tensions she experienced while reading, though it does not move beyond them: Junior sees race as “something you can change,” whereas she sees it as “something you are born into.” She also points out that Junior believes White people have hope and success, while she believes White people also have “struggles and downfalls.” Anna sees this tension as the difficulty she feels while reading: “It is difficult to see these phrases . . . viewing us as superior and flawless.” In naming these tensions, Anna uses “us” to refer to herself and her assumed readers, which works to further separate Junior from her own White perspective. Schieble (2010) found similar “us/them” speak in her study of pre-service teachers designing questions for high school students reading *Luna*, Julie Ann Peters’s (2004) novel about a transgendered teen (p. 380). Citing Rogers and Christian’s definition of “white talk,” Schieble (2010) explains that this dichotomizing language allows speakers to ignore the ways in which they reinscribe racism (or heterosexism), and she calls attention to how teachers may mistakenly assume their students share dominant perspectives (p. 380).

In this case, Anna clings to the rightness of her dominant perspective throughout her journal—so much so that she struggles to read the novel at times. In fact, I can imagine how Pimental or Coleman (2012), writers of the ELA Common Core State

**Table 2.** Sample entry from Anna’s journal

Quotations or Illustration:	Response:
<p>“I know, I know, but some Indians think you have to act white to make your life better. Some Indians think you <i>become</i> white if you try to make your life better, if you become successful.”</p>	<p>The conversation between Gordy and Arnold makes it seem like race is something that you can change instead of something that you are born into. Gordy says it all when he says “If that were true, then wouldn’t all white people be successful?” It is difficult to see these phrases from an Indian point of view when they are talking about your own race because I see all of the struggles and downfalls that white people have, too, so it makes it tough to see how Arnold is viewing us as superior and flawless.</p>
<p>“If that were true, then wouldn’t all white people be successful?”</p>	

Standards, might read Anna's problem as a reader: "She jumps too quickly to her own reactions." Their directions to Anna might be, *Instead of thinking about what's difficult for you, focus on what's difficult for the character.* And to some extent, those directions would be helpful. Perspective taking as a literacy practice does require listening. In the quote Anna selected from *Junior*, for example, "I know, I know, but some Indians think you have to act white to make your life better. Some Indians think you *become* white if you try to make your life better, if you become successful," we hear Junior trying to explain the way "some Indians" think (Alexie, 2007, p. 131). He is weighing a belief he is familiar with, a belief he seems to have inherited but is not completely sure about, during a discussion with his White friend, Gordy. Anna ignores the context of this comment, though, missing the fact that Junior is thinking through his own and others' perspectives, that his beliefs are "in process." Not only does Anna miss this context, but she also then misses Junior's underlying struggle with sorting through these beliefs. We wonder along with Junior: Will he have to become White to be successful? Can he be a successful Indian in a White world?

Though Anna struggles to think in terms of Junior's personal struggle, losing her awareness of the tensions she is encountering between her own world and the textual world would make her reading far less meaningful. Those tensions are how we gain awareness of our own beliefs ("I guess I think of race as something you're born into"). They can push us to recognize that there are alternatives to the way we see the world and, with reflection, they can reveal systems of oppression and privilege that help form our and others' views, experiences, and identities. Perspective taking, then, is most rich, most meaningful, and most transformative when those tensions are front and center, when our own beliefs are part of the purpose and process of reading.

Explaining how Rosenblatt's transactional theory allows for critical perspectives, Cai (2008) names how the feelings we experience can lead to critical acts, such as unpacking assumptions and trying on different perspectives: "Critical literacy is a personal as well as political matter because it entails examining one's own aesthetic experience" (p. 214). Anna has yet to examine and reflect on her own aesthetic experience, and though I acknowledge here that closer

reading skills are one piece of that puzzle, what Anna most noticeably lacks in reading this novel is Blau's performative literacy, principally the ability to revise a perspective.

In contrast, that ability gives Lynn two different inroads: examining her own perspective and also better analyzing those of the textual world. Anna specifically struggles to acknowledge that two contradictory perspectives can be true in the world at the same time. For example, plenty of White people struggle to feel hope and to excel economically in America (this seems to be one of Anna's underlying issues with Junior's understanding of White people). At the same time—and this is where the flexibility of performative literacy comes in—the historical oppression of Native people in America defines systemic poverty and racism; Junior's struggle to believe opportunities could be his in a White world makes historical and systemic sense. How has life in America taught him otherwise? What I am suggesting, then, is that if Anna developed the ability to revise her own perspective, she would, in fact, become a closer reader. As Blau argues, performative literacy is what makes analytical reading possible (p. 211).

Interestingly, Anna ends this dialogic journal noting a change, albeit a small one, but one that has real political teeth: "After reading this book and seeing the views of Indians, I don't think it is fair that schools make their mascot an Indian. I do have to agree with Arnold there." Anna displays a reluctance to agree, and there is little explanation of why she thinks Junior is right, but somehow this book initiated a shift in her feeling about using a Native person as a mascot. We can see in Anna's brief response here the changes that Thein, Beach, and Parks describe, and we also see evidence that hearing Junior's perspective pushed Anna to acknowledge that there are other meaningful ways to read such a mascot.

---

**Perspective taking is most rich, most meaningful, and most transformative when tensions [between our reality and the textual world] are front and center, when our own beliefs are part of the purpose and process of reading.**

---

### Goals for Reading

Thein and Sloan (2012) have recently argued that the practice of perspective taking must be couched within a broader ethical goal for reading: “to construc[t] beliefs, opinions and stances that are flexibly located in relation to the beliefs and values of others” (p. 321).

Indeed, Anna’s and Lynn’s responses suggest different

---

### **Lynn’s responses suggest that she reads in order to gain insight into others’ worlds but also, and perhaps most important, to gain self-awareness.**

---

goals for reading. Anna’s responses indicate that she reads with a positivistic stance, assessing what seems right or wrong. She mentions doing research about team mascots and rates of diabetes while reading and spends much of her notebook entry explaining how Junior’s perspective doesn’t match her reality and thus must be incorrect. Lynn’s responses

suggest that she reads in order to gain insight into others’ worlds but also, and perhaps most important, to gain self-awareness. In fact, her notebook form begins with her own recognition of Junior’s thoughts on poverty:

We grew up poor and lived under the poverty line. I loved when Junior said being poor doesn’t teach you anything. It teaches you how to be poor. It’s sort of true! A lot of my co-workers complain about how little money we make. I just think in my head, I currently make more money by myself than what my mother and father made together and they had two children to take care of. I’m not going to complain!

By engaging Junior’s perspective, Lynn was able to find common ground and see her life in new ways (“It’s sort of true!”). The “sort of true” comment highlights Lynn’s willingness to recast her understanding of something personal. In other words, she is able to recognize her own life within the descriptions of a life that in many ways is radically different from her own. Blau would label this as one component of “intellectual generosity and fallibilism,” a “handful of related traits that allow readers to learn from and be influenced by texts” (2003, p. 214).

At the same time, Lynn was quick to note confrontations between her world and the textual world, which allowed her to acknowledge the limits of her perspective. Readers who can “appreciate alterna-

tive visions” can be “changed by their experience in their sympathies, in their knowledge of a represented world, and in the ways they apprehend or construct themselves” (Blau, 2003, p. 214). We see Lynn’s new understanding of the tribe in her dialogic form, which perhaps speaks to why she felt it was so important to make sure Sherman Alexie was Native American when she finished the book—something she shared during class discussion. If a reader of a novel is changing her understanding of the world based on her reading experience, then she needs to feel confident trusting that experience.

### Trying on Complex Feelings

Near the end of our class discussion, one student worried out loud about teaching this book. “I would want it to be transformative,” she said, but she was afraid it would leave students feeling hopeless. She went on to say that the end left her sad—it was unclear where Junior was going. Will he have a more hopeful life given his losses and struggles? Will he pursue an education? She was worried students would end the book without a map, without a sense that they can indeed gain power, voice, and options. I asked if others felt the same way at the end, and we realized we had a divided class. We returned to the ending scene and reread Junior’s basketball game with his best friend, Rowdy. I quote a short section here:

I would always love Rowdy. And I would always miss him, too. Just as I would always love and miss my grandmother, my big sister, and Eugene.

Just as I would always love and miss my reservation and my tribe.

I hoped and prayed that they would someday forgive me for leaving them.

I hoped and prayed that I would someday forgive myself for leaving them.

“Aw man,” Rowdy said. “Stop crying.” (Alexie, 2007, p. 230).

I asked students to account for why this scene felt sad to them. In offering an answer to this question, one student mentioned that this scene reminds her of how she feels at family reunions. She explained that no one in her family has a college degree, and now she’s about to finish her MA and start a Ph.D. program. She recalled talking to her cousin at a recent family event and how it felt awkward and sad because they had



so little in common. We talked as a group about the reality that gaining an education, leaving home, and changing social class can be painful. We returned to Junior's case, where he is not only undergoing these changes, but also aligning himself with a different ethnicity (one that had subjugated his own); there is no way for him to avoid pain, even with the hope that leaving home provides.

What this moment emphasized was the sheer complexity of feeling at the end of this book. That complexity itself challenged students trying to take on Junior's perspective. Leaving home for a hopeful future seems as if it should be a purely happy occasion, but as Junior's and my student's experiences highlight, that is often not the case, especially when family, race, and culture are at stake.

## Significance and Implications

### The Role of Emotion and Classroom Practices

This final conversation reveals what Anna's and Lynn's notebooks also reveal—the significance of emotion in the strategy of perspective taking. First and foremost, we experience “tensions” through emotional response. Both Anna and Lynn recognized their difficulty in understanding Junior and the tribe's perspectives when they felt frustration, anger, disappointment, or confusion. These also were moments when the complexity of the text itself emerged. We have to teach students how to recognize and account for those feelings, as Lynn does, not to inhabit them as “unreflective reactions” (Wilner, 2002, p. 179), as we see in Anna's defense of her perspective. Ultimately, we need to find ways to teach students how discomfort or anger can increase understanding and meaning. To do so, we need to simultaneously teach our students how to revise perspectives and acknowledge (and live with the fact) that contradictory perspectives can exist at the same time. How can we do this?

1. Ask students questions about the text that push them to understand a character on his or her terms. *Why does this character act or respond this way? How does it make sense for that character? If I don't understand it, why not? What bothers me or confuses me about this response or action? Why does it stand out to me? What gaps in my cultural knowledge or understanding could help explain that difference?*

2. Create spaces where tensions are shared and examined, even if it is difficult to do so. To get

students back into the text during the evening we discussed Alexie's novel, I began by asking them to find moments when they felt race came up in ways that made them uncomfortable. I gave them all time to look through the book, and then I began by sharing my moment, a moment when Junior gets a ride home from Roger, a White boy at school, who has gone from bullying him to feeling sorry for him. Roger has figured out that Junior actually has no ride home and has planned to hitchhike his way home to the reservation (something he often does). Alexie (2007) writes:

And Roger, being of kind heart and generous pocket, and a little bit racist, drove me home that night.

And he drove me home plenty of other nights, too.

If you let people into your life a little bit, they can be pretty damn amazing. (p. 129)

I shared how conflicted this description made me feel, causing me to reflect on the conflicting motivations within my own and others' actions in the world. As we see in this brief description, racism can fuel pity, pity can fuel kindness, and kindness can fuel friendship—a rather disturbing, contradictory sequence. As students shared the moments they selected, other students responded, both complicating readings and adding connections.

Throughout this discussion, we realized that by making two White teachers mentors for Junior, it became easier for readers to dismiss the perspective that students struggled the most to understand—that of the tribe. It was as if those teachers, characters my students understandably admired, became the force opposing the adults from the reservation (and it seemed as if my students felt like they could understand only one of those perspectives, instead of appreciating both). One student wondered aloud why Alexie made the choice to create two White teachers as Junior's most helpful mentors. Though we didn't come up with clear answers, the discussion was a turning point for the class. Students were not only sharing their own difficulties, but they were using them to articulate

---

**Ultimately, we need to find ways to teach students how discomfort or anger can increase understanding and meaning.**

---

important questions about the creation and impact of the novel.

3. Find ways for students to “try on” other perspectives in writing, as recommended by Thein, Beach, and Parks. One student, in fact, did this for her journal form. For this particular form, the student chose events significant to Junior and then wrote diary entries in response. She noted in her reflection:

By writing as Junior, I found myself understanding him more, even the parts that I thought were a little troubling or hard to relate to. . . . When I tried on Junior’s perspective, I found that despite the fact I am a white woman and he is a Native American teenage boy, we actually had a lot in common. Both of us had experienced alcoholism in the family, were poor growing up, and lost family members and friends in violent ways due to our surroundings.

This student came to class able to talk about the complexity of Junior’s experience with honesty and awareness. Her own performative literacy, perhaps her life history, and perhaps also the experience of writing Junior’s diary entries as she read, enabled her to read this book with eyes open to both Junior and herself. I also recommend trying on perspectives in writing as a valuable communal activity; group members add different pieces of a complex perspective that other students might miss, helping students to flesh out a character’s point of view more deeply.

4. Give students chances to directly examine their perspectives after reading and discussing texts and acknowledge that one goal of reading literature is to expand our understandings of people and the world. Questions such as *What do I know now that I didn’t know before?* are an easy way to start, but other questions about perspective should push students: *What beliefs of your own felt challenged by this book? Have you revised your beliefs in any way? or Many different experiences of life and history exist in America, and many of those experiences oppose others. What did you learn about an experience that isn’t your own through this book? What difficulties about that experience do you understand? What difficulties do you still struggle to understand?*

5. For teacher educators in particular, give students ownership over their experiences with texts by inviting them to create dialogic forms for response. There is risk involved in ceding this control to students, as Anna’s journal form illustrates: hers is in direct contrast to the perspective-taking goals of the assignment. That said, in a classroom environment where these forms are shared, discussed, and compared, students learn to recognize the limits and possibilities of their own designs, and they gain from the designs and responses other students offer. Most important, they take ownership over the experience of reading, and they recognize their own ability to continue to revise that experience. For example, as we shared dialogic forms during our discussion of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, one student remarked that she wanted to try reading the book with another student’s form. These forms, in other words, altered the dialogue readers had with themselves as they read. With multiple possibilities in their design of the forms, students were able to try out new ways of experiencing texts, and this encouraged an overall revisionary approach to reading and perspectives.

6. It became clear throughout the semester that as a character’s situation and allegiances became more complex, students struggled to appreciate multiple, often contradictory perspectives—those that exist within a single textual world or a single character. To help students think through this complexity (both in their own lives and in the world of the text) and to try on perspectives that are complicated, multifaceted, and contradictory, culture mapping can be a useful tool. An exercise used for various community purposes, culture mapping can also help individuals identify their various identities and the tensions that exist between them. As Okrah (2012) has explained, “Since we all belong to specific cultures, we use our own cultural lenses to produce the illusion of the only possible and the only acceptable vision of the world, lifestyles and mentalities” (para. 2). When we can try on other perspectives through reading, we “realize the specifics of our own consciousness” (para. 2), a particular goal of culture mapping. Ideally, the exercise can help students identify those multiple identities and tensions for characters as well.

Understanding Junior’s complex system of belonging, for example, is an integral component of fleshing out his perspective and understanding his

---

**Give students ownership  
over their experiences  
with texts by inviting them  
to create dialogic forms  
for response.**

---

struggle. He's a nerd, a reader, an artist, a boy, a proud member of his family, a person who is close to people who struggle with alcoholism, a Spokane Indian, a resident of the reservation, a boy from poverty, a basketball player, a great student who wants to learn, and someone who has experienced physical disabilities. With a graphic representation of the list, we could begin picking out those identities that clash. For example, being a great student who wants to learn puts him at odds with his identity as a resident of the reservation—the overarching conflict of the novel. Leading students through their own culture-mapping exercise before attempting to map Junior can help students identify the ways they experience tensions between their own various identities. Ultimately, this exercise can help students acknowledge complexity in the perspectives of characters who may feel distant and unfamiliar (and who they are far more likely to simplify) and also help them recognize that no one's identity development is simple or painless. In the case of Junior, this exercise might have helped students appreciate Junior's final scene with Rowdy, his sadness in anticipating his eventual departure from his home, and also his hope (and ours) that this departure will give him far more options than he currently sees.

### **Pain-free Reading and Becoming a Teacher**

As a teacher of teachers, I cannot help but worry that my students will avoid *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* or other texts unfamiliar to the majority of their students because they feel “too complex, too controversial, too risky, too time-consuming, too political, too painful” (White-Kaulaity, 2006, p. 10). This becomes especially problematic when the tensions themselves are what we want readers to experience and use as steps toward trying on alternative perspectives. As White-Kaulaity (2006) puts it, “Teachers must be prepared to guide students in their awareness and understanding that there are contrasts in the American experience” (p. 12). Privileging those contrasts in acts of reading—and as teachers, in our selection of texts—is how we push all of our students to grapple with perspectives, voices, and realities that are not their own. As I've illustrated through Anna's and Lynn's responses, that grappling can be uncomfortable and difficult; helping readers mobilize that discomfort, though, ought to be our goal as teachers.

As teacher educators, we need to welcome and value the tensions our students experience when reading multicultural literature. In their research of teachers' perspectives on multicultural literature, Kuo and Alsop (2010) found that many White, middle-class teachers lack knowledge and experience with multicultural literature—one major reason why its presence in English Education programs is so vital (p. 18). It is through the recognition of clashes in perspective that readers are challenged to acknowledge the limits of their gaze, take on new perspectives, and revise their worldviews. Without those clashes, without those discomforts, we cannot push students and ourselves to see things in new ways. Again and again, I find that it is the chance to re-see that makes reading multicultural literature so powerful, so enriching, and so necessary. All readers should get this chance.

*A former middle and high school teacher, Emily Wender is an assistant professor of English at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. She teaches courses on young adult literature, the teaching of reading, and the teaching of writing in the English Education program.*

### **References**

- Alexie, S. (2007). *The absolutely true diary of a part-time Indian*. New York, NY: Little, Brown.
- Allison, D. (1992). *Bastard out of Carolina*. New York, NY: Dutton.
- Athanases, S. Z. (1996). A gay-themed lesson in an ethnic literature curriculum: Tenth graders' responses to “Dear Anita.” *Harvard Educational Review*, 66, 231–256.
- Barcott, B. (2007, Nov 11). Off the rez [Rev. of *The absolutely true diary of a part-time Indian* by Sherman Alexie]. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/11/books/review/Barcott3-t.html>.
- Blau, S. (2003). *The literature workshop*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Bomer, R. (2011). *Building adolescent literacy in today's English classrooms*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Cai, M. (2008). Transactional theory and the study of multicultural literature. *Language Arts*, 85, 212–220.
- Coleman, D., & Pimental, S. (2012, April 12). Revised publishers' criteria for the common core state standards in English language arts and literacy, grades 3–12. Retrieved from [http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Publishers\\_Criteria\\_for\\_3-12.pdf](http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Publishers_Criteria_for_3-12.pdf).
- Dudek, D. (2011.) Multicultural. In P. Nell & L. Paul (Eds.), *Keywords for children's literature* (pp. 155–160). New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Glazier, J., & Seo, J. A. (2005). Multicultural literature and discussion as mirror and window. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 48, 686–700.

- Grobman, L. (2007). *Multicultural hybridity: Transforming American literary scholarship and pedagogy*. Urbana, IL: NCTE.
- Guillory, N. A. (2012). Moving toward a community of resistance through autobiographical inquiry: Creating disruptive spaces in a multicultural education course. *Multicultural Education, 19*(3), 11–16.
- Kuo, N-H., & Alsup, J. (2010). Why do Chinese people have weird names? *ALAN Review, 37*(2): 17–24.
- Okrah, K. (2012). Culture maps: A tool for building competent global and multicultural education curriculum. *The African Symposium, 12*(2). Retrieved from <http://www.ncsu.edu/aern/archives.htm>.
- Peters, J. A. (2004). *Luna*. New York, NY: Megan Tingley Books/Brown and Company.
- Salvatori, M. R., & Donahue, P. (2005). *The elements (and pleasures) of difficulty*. New York, NY: Pearson Longman.
- Schieble, M. B. (2010). Reading between the lines of reader response: Constructing “the other” through the aesthetic stance. *Changing English: Studies in Culture and Education, 17*, 375–384.
- Thein, A. H., Beach, R., & Parks, D. (2007). Perspective-taking as transformative practice in teaching multicultural literature to white students. *The English Journal, 97*(2), 54–60.
- Thein, A. H., & Sloan, D. L. (2012). Towards an ethical approach to perspective-taking and the teaching of multicultural texts: Getting beyond persuasion, politeness, and political correctness. *Changing English: Studies in Culture and Education, 19*, 313–324.
- Trites, R. S. (2003). Multiculturalism in children’s literature. *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly, 28*(2), 66–67.
- White-Kaulaity, M. (2006). The voices of power and the power of voices: Teaching with Native American literature. *The ALAN Review, 34*(1), 8–16.
- Wilner, A. (2002). Confronting resistance: Sonny’s blues—and mine. *Pedagogy, 2*, 173–196.

# Enhancing Antiracist Teacher Education:

## Critical Witnessing through Pairing YA Literature and Adult Nonfiction

In this article, we borrow the term *critical witnessing* to describe our purposes for pairing multicultural young adult (YA) fiction with adult nonfiction in our antiracist work with preservice urban elementary teachers. Tiffany Ana López (2009) explains critical witnessing as the “process of being so moved or struck by the experience of encountering a text as to embrace a specific course of action avowedly intended to forge a path toward change” (p. 205).

The “specific course of action” we hoped to encourage in our work with preservice teachers was an understanding that racism isn’t random or innocent but intentionally structural and systemic—what race scholar Zeus Leonardo (2013) calls the “patterned and enduring . . . acts, decisions, and policies white subjects perpetrate on people of color” (pp. 137, 139). We believe this understanding is crucial to achieving social justice in public education, given that patterns such as disproportionate referrals of students of color in special education and advanced courses, disproportionate office referral and suspension rates among students of color, and an underrepresentation of students of color in schoolwide clubs, organizations, and other prestigious arenas go unnoticed by colorblind teachers, or teachers who claim post-racial ideologies (whether consciously or unconsciously) (Milner, 2010; Milner & Laughter, 2014).

As Solomon, Portelli, Daniel, and Campbell (2006) suggest, our [predominantly White] teacher education students are poised to “reproduce and transmit the racial order to the next generation” (p. 148) unless current understandings of race and racism

are disrupted. Ultimately, we wanted our students to learn about and consider the history and contemporaneity of racism in the US, examine their own racial identities, examine the ideologies with which they will enter future elementary classrooms, and “interrogate their personal investment in either challenging or maintaining the existing systems” of racism evidenced in public schooling (Solomon et al., 2006, p. 150).

To help our students begin to see racism as an “enduring” system of intentional “acts, decisions, and policies,” we carefully paired two young adult novels—Sharon Draper’s (2006) historical fiction YA novel, *Copper Sun*, and Walter Dean Myers’s (1999) contemporary realistic fiction YA novel, *Monster*—with excerpts from Michelle Alexander’s (2012) nonfiction work, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* in Chonika’s urban elementary education course.

### The Urban Education Course Context

Chonika is a Black woman who, prior to teaching at the college level, worked as an elementary school teacher in Title I schools that served students from low-income backgrounds. Susan is a White female who has taught secondary English/Language Arts in rural, suburban, and urban public school contexts. The urban education program we describe in this article is situated within the context of a larger teacher education program where White females make up the vast majority of the student body. Many of these students plan to work in majority White communities like the ones in which they were raised and received

their K–12 education. This mirrors national trends, as nearly 85 percent of US teachers are White, monolingual native English speakers, many of whom have had very little, if any, training in working with culturally and linguistically diverse learners; many of whom benefit from White privilege; and many of whom hold deficit-oriented beliefs toward young people of color (Glenn, 2012; 2013).

However, growing diversity in US schools disrupts the notion that the vast majority of public schools

---

**Although students [are] interested in urban education, they [come] to the field with limited knowledge of both historical and contemporary issues related to race and racism and their own racial identities and privilege.**

---

will remain White. Demographic shifts in K–12 schools prompt us to take a closer look at the skills these future teachers will need to be effective teachers in racially and culturally diverse schools and communities, but also urge us to consider how teacher training must change so that teachers are capable of preparing all students to function in a diverse and equitable world.

This article documents our experiences working with a subset of teacher

education students pursuing an elementary urban education concentration at a large public university in the Southeast United States. The urban education program follows a 3-semester cohort model where undergraduate students begin as pre-interns in the spring semester of their senior year. Upon completion of the spring semester, students graduate and are subsequently enrolled as Master’s students and teaching interns.

In the Master’s degree program, the interns attend classes for a full academic year and the summer sessions before and after that year. During the internship year that follows, they work in schools four days a week and attend classes one day per week. This article documents our experiences with the 2014 cohort during the first of three semesters in the urban teacher education program. At the time of this study, the urban education concentration was comprised of 21 female students, 19 of whom agreed to participate in the study on which this article is based. Two of the study participants were of Asian descent, one was

multiracial (Mexican and White); the remaining 16 students self-identified as White.

The course was co-taught by several instructors and covered content related to teaching methods, classroom management, and educational foundations. In addition to this course, students were also enrolled in courses that fulfilled requirements for their undergraduate degree programs. Outside of the class sessions we report on in this article, course instructors regularly engaged students in discussions and activities related to teaching in diverse contexts. The course met for three hours twice per week for fifteen weeks; however, the young adult literature (YAL) portion of the class met for eight consecutive classes over four weeks and was taught exclusively by us.

## **Revising Our Antiracist Pedagogy**

We are always striving to become more effective antiracist teacher educators. After teaching this class for several semesters, Chonika felt that although students were interested in urban education, they came to the field with limited knowledge of both historical and contemporary issues related to race and racism and their own racial identities and privilege. The students were committed to “saving” the children in poor communities of color but seemed unaware of how historical and structural discrimination created gaps in socioeconomic status and student achievement. Nor did the students seem to see themselves as intimately connected to “those” students—the racial, ethnic, and language minorities they served. These limited understandings can be problematic, as other antiracist educators and researchers have found that the inability to “examine the larger historical contexts that have attributed to and buttress the contemporary reification of injustices” can prevent teachers from understanding how racism and privilege continue as a system of oppression and domination today (Solomon et al., 2006, p. 158).

In the past, the course did not address YAL specifically and consisted of exploring theoretical models, such as multicultural education, critical pedagogy, critical race theory, antiracist education, and culturally responsive pedagogy. However, students had little understanding as to why these frameworks might prove useful in schools that serve children of color. We perceived these limitations in teacher education students’ understanding as major impediments to their potential

effectiveness as agents of change in urban schools.

Revisions to the sessions we co-taught evolved from a dialogue we had after Susan observed one of Chonika's class sessions the previous year. We discussed possibilities for teaching historical content and the relationship between structural racism and the lived realities of people of color in a way that could help our teacher education students develop empathy and learn information that could spark their interest in and commitment to antiracist teaching. As we thought about the kinds of media that could invoke such meaning for students, we decided on a curriculum framed to assist students in their burgeoning understandings of antiracist pedagogy. As Howard (2006) puts it, "[S]omething powerful has to happen to [White people] . . ." for them to begin to critically examine racialized oppression as well as their own Whiteness and privilege (p.17). We hoped that the addition of YAL, paired with engaging nonfiction, would serve as that "something powerful" for students who seemed to have not yet experienced a "critical witnessing" moment—an encounter with antiracist pedagogy that would spur further racial identity development and growth.

### **Pairing Multicultural YA Fiction with Nonfiction**

López (2009) explains that *critical witnessing* is experienced as a "profound level of response . . ." (p. 206). We wanted our students to experience a kind of response to the course readings that would positively engage them and help them remain open to exploring their own racial identities and the ways privilege is implicated in structural racism. We know from research by antiracist educators that White teacher candidates' responses to multicultural readings often assert notions of individualism and meritocracy ("Anyone can achieve their dreams if they work hard"); focus on personal feelings of discomfort and guilt ("I'm not a racist"), which can subvert a structural study of racism; and/or negate White privilege ("What about affirmative action?") (Leonardo, 2013; Levine-Rasky, 2000; Solomon et al., 2006; Trainor, 2005).

To try to discourage these kinds of responses, we turned to young adult literature. Susan is a long-time advocate of multicultural YA fiction and has worked to reposition this category of YA literature as central to

the teacher education curriculum for several important reasons. Multicultural YA fiction can provide a multiplicity of voices and perspectives that are typically absent in teacher preparation. In addition, multicultural YA fiction can be highly engaging for readers, as it brings diverse young people to life through rich characterization, authentic dialogue, and realistic portrayals of such classic YA themes as coming of age and the search for identity. Good multicultural YA fiction makes us care about and empathize with the young people we read about.

Multicultural YA fiction also provides self-affirmation for diverse readers while expanding all readers' worldviews. In the urban elementary course, we drew on Bishop's (1990) well-known metaphor of books as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors to encourage our preservice teachers to 1) consider what felt "familiar" and "strange" to them in *Copper Sun* and *Monster* (windows); 2) explore the ways they saw themselves "reflected" in the situations and characters in the novels (mirrors), and 3) consider how they could move beyond barriers to engage new people, places, and ideas (sliding glass doors).

Finally, we know multicultural YA fiction can provide some comfortable distance between readers and the potential "hot topics" of race and diversity the texts may offer. This comfortable distance can reduce some of the emotional risks often associated with conversations around race in the classroom (Glenn, 2006), which has been an important goal in Susan's work, as she has used multicultural YA fiction to help beginning teachers 1) learn how to take up issues of race and racism in the classroom, and 2) challenge and refine knowledge of and dispositions toward teaching students of color (see Groenke & Maples, 2009; Groenke, Maples, & Henderson, 2010; Groenke & Youngquist, 2011).

---

**We wanted our students to experience a kind of response to the course readings that would positively engage them and help them remain open to exploring their own racial identities and the ways privilege is implicated in structural racism.**

---

But as we and other teacher educators who use multicultural YA fiction in preservice teacher education have begun to consider (see Groenke et al., in press), using YA fiction alone may be counterproductive to antiracist goals. As Glenn (2012, 2013) found in her work with preservice teachers, the use of multicultural YA fiction—Matt de la Peña’s *Mexican WhiteBoy*

(2008) and *We Were Here* (2009) and Jacqueline Woodson’s *After Tupac and D Foster* (2008)—did not disrupt the deficit perspectives toward youth of color that her students held, even as they gained new insights. Haddix & Price-Dennis (2013) also found that their use of urban “street fiction” with beginning teachers—Sapphire’s *Push* (1997) and Sister Souljah’s *The Coldest Winter Ever* (2006)—may have served to reify dominant stereotypes about youth of color (e.g., youth

of color are “non-literate”). These—like the responses described by other antiracist researchers—are not the powerful responses of critical witnessing that López describes.

Feeling this tension about the problematic use of YA fiction in antiracist teacher education; hoping to help preservice teachers begin to see the historical context of structural, systemic racism as connected to contemporary forms of racial oppression; and desiring powerful responses that inspire self-reflexivity and personal and social change, we decided to pair adult nonfiction with the multicultural YA fiction we use in our antiracist work with beginning urban elementary teachers. Award-winning personal essayist, Phillip Lopate (2013) suggests that while fiction “[gets] at the literary truth,” nonfiction “aims for both the literary and literal truth” (p. 186). We wondered if providing our students the engaging “literary truth” of YA fiction, paired with both the “literary and literal truth” of nonfiction, would encourage the kind of critical witnessing we hoped to see.

We also decided to use nonfiction because we are feeling the pressure of the Common Core Reading and Literacy Standards in our state, especially their emphasis on increased reading of nonfiction and informational texts across the school day. While we are aware of the controversy and debates surrounding the Standards, best practice in reading instruction, and definitions of “nonfiction,” we feel the new Standards provide an opportunity to model for teachers how nonfiction can be integrated with engaging YA fiction to meet instructional goals in the classroom. For all of these reasons, we paired Draper’s and Myers’s YA fictional novels with the first two chapters of Michelle Alexander’s nonfiction text, *The New Jim Crow*. We describe these texts in more detail below.

## Texts as Critical Witnesses

### Sharon Draper’s *Copper Sun*

López explains that critical witnessing “entails more than just telling . . . a story,” and instead “works from a story’s . . . intention . . . to spotlight the conditions that brought the story into being” (p. 206). Sharon Draper’s award-winning historical fiction YA novel, *Copper Sun*, spotlights the horrors of the African slave trade, as witnessed by 15-year-old Amari, who is brutally beaten, branded, and stolen from her African village and then sold into the slave trade. Amari survives the Middle Passage, only to be bought by a Southern plantation owner and given to a 16-year-old boy as a birthday present. On the plantation, Amari struggles to hold on to her memories and self-worth but finds strength and friendship in unexpected places. Ultimately, she escapes toward freedom and begins to heal.

Draper (2014) explains on the *Copper Sun* website that her own travels to Ghana inspired her to write the book. In Ghana, Draper visited the slave castles, and as a result, she “knew [she] had to tell the story of just one of those who had passed that way.” Draper further explains that she “speaks” for “all those who came before [her]—the untold multitudes of ancestors who needed a voice.”

López (2009) suggests that authors position themselves as critical witnesses when they “[share] stories of survival and healing” (p. 205). Draper explains that, ultimately, she presented the character of Amari as someone who

---

**We wondered if providing our students the engaging “literary truth” of YA fiction, paired with both the “literary and literal truth” of nonfiction, would encourage the kind of critical witnessing we hoped to see.**

---



undergoes the humiliations of slavery and who survives to pass off her history to the next generation. I think it's real important to remember the past and never forget those who came before us. It is our job to tell their stories. . . . Slavery is a topic that should not be ignored, but discussed and remembered. The generation that does not remember the evils of the past may be forced to repeat them.

We felt *Copper Sun* would be a powerful resource for our students to learn about various aspects of the institution of slavery, including the origins of the slave trade; the Middle Passage; beliefs about slaves (e.g., they are savages and animals) used to rationalize slavery; the processes of selling and buying slaves; slave working conditions and how slave labor (and slave knowledge of rice cultivation in Charleston, South Carolina) became the foundation for the Southern plantation economy; and even the horrors of rape and other physical torture and abuse experienced by female slaves. It is one thing to learn about this information through factual details and statistics, but we wanted to put a human face on the history of slavery. This is what fiction, or historical fiction, is especially good for—humanizing history, especially history that must be remembered. We also believed that Draper's novel would begin to set in place the understanding that our “[White] ancestors, using various tools of domination and oppression, have created a society in which their benefits and privileges have been amassed at the expense of other racial and ethnic groups” (Solomon et al., 2006, p. 154).

### **Walter Dean Myers's *Monster***

After reading *Copper Sun*, students then read Walter Dean Myers's *Monster*, which tells the contemporary story of Steve, a 16-year-old African American male on trial for being an assumed accomplice to involuntary manslaughter. Throughout the novel, Steve struggles to understand who he is and how he ended up on trial for his life. His lawyer tells him it's her job to make him look “human” in the eyes of the jury. When the judge, his lawyer, and jury members look at Steve, they see someone to fear—a sub-human, a thug, a “monster,” and someone expendable. Steve struggles throughout the book to come to terms with this and prove to the jury and readers that he is a “good person.”

We wanted students to make connections between the history of slavery and Steve's contemporary struggle to be seen as human first, and African American and male second. We also believed *Monster* would

begin to help students see how racism is institutionalized in systems like the juvenile justice system. As Willis and Parker (2009) explain, “The novel grapples with the larger issue of Steve's attempts to proclaim his innocence within a system that has no interest in that innocence and instead trades heavily in racist perceptions of him (and his fellow inmates) as guilty before his trial begins” (p. 42). Willis and Parker, who apply critical race theory to the novel when using it with preservice English teachers, note further:

It should be deeply troubling [to readers] that the judge, attorneys, and most of the jurors are White, while Steve and the other men convicted of the murder are men of color; a fact that must be acknowledged and addressed when teaching this book. The lack of seriousness displayed by the judge and attorney . . . and Steve's attorney's desire for him to concentrate on presenting himself as innocent are equally disturbing. In addition, Steve's experience inside the detention center speaks to the larger condition of incarceration as dehumanizing. (p. 45)

Again, we thought putting a young, human face on the issue of institutionalized racism would help our students come to care about Steve and motivate their engagement with the hard questions of Steve's guilt as “implicated by his Blackness” (Willis & Parker, p. 43).

Writing in 1982, Rudine Sims (Bishop) was the first to suggest that Walter Dean Myers might be a critical witness, calling him a “writer-witness,” an author whose books have attempted to “change the world, at least the all-white world of children's books, by creating truer images of Afro-Americans and by increasing their visibility” (p. 79). Indeed, in books like *Monster*, Myers creates a “true image”—complex as it is—of the ongoing, contemporary African American struggle to be viewed as human. Myers also bears witness in *Monster* to the fact that race continues to matter in how children of color are perceived in society and that young Black males, especially, are guilty of being Black until proven innocent.

### **Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow***

Finally, students read the first two chapters of Michelle Alexander's book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2012). A long-time civil rights activist and litigator, Alexander argues vehemently that, contrary to popular beliefs that we now live in a post-racial society, a racial caste system still prevails in America in the form of mass incarceration. Like its Jim Crow predecessor, mass

incarceration (the “new” Jim Crow) is today’s racist system of social control. As Alexander explains in the book, more African Americans are under correctional control today than were enslaved in 1850, and the effects have been devastating to communities of color.

---

**We hoped that the “literal truth” presented in Alexander’s chapters would resonate with the “literary truths” found in the fictional YA novels our students read.**

---

The first chapter in Alexander’s book sketches the history of “racialized social control” in America through a caste system based mostly on race. Alexander explains that this caste-based system has existed in three different forms: slavery, Jim Crow, and mass incarceration. Alexander details how each of these forms was brought about deliberately and

how, in its latest form of mass incarceration, the caste system continues to achieve its aims of segregation.

The second chapter delineates the history of the “War on Drugs” and fleshes out the processes by which the “War on Drugs” in the 1980s was used to legitimize incarceration of people of color. The chapter also highlights the role of the US Supreme Court in “immunizing” structural racism from legal challenge by dismantling the protections of the 4th Amendment. The chapter also makes the point that mass incarceration as the “new” Jim Crow depends upon its victims being burdened with the prison label, which stays with former inmates who are discriminated against, legally, for the rest of their lives, and who are thus denied employment, housing, education, and public benefits.

When asked why she decided to write *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander explains:

I began to awaken to the reality that our criminal justice system now functions much more like a system of racial or social control than a system of crime prevention and control. I wanted to share with others the facts, history [and] stories that I wish that I had known long before in the hopes that others would begin to have the same kind of awakening and commit themselves to building a movement to end mass incarceration in America. (Christian, 2014, p. 32)

We felt that ending with Alexander’s chapters might help students to make clear connections

between Amari’s historical account of slavery and Steve’s contemporary account of his life as a Black boy growing up in a challenging neighborhood to understand how the same institutionalized structures continue to dehumanize and oppress people of color. We hoped that the “literal truth” presented in Alexander’s chapters would resonate with the “literary truths” found in the fictional YA novels our students read. Together, these pieces were used to demonstrate the interconnectedness of interpersonal experiences and larger systemic issues. Students read the YA novels in small-group literature circles and the Alexander chapters in larger jigsawed groups, which we describe in more detail below.

### **Facilitating Discussion about Race and Racism**

We modified Harvey Daniels’s (2002) model of small-group book clubs, or literature circles, to facilitate student discussion about the books. Daniels’s model encourages student choice in text selections, but as we describe above, we had very specific instructional goals in mind that delimited the choices to the three texts we had selected. While in the future we intend to include more texts by other authors of color in our instruction, we focused on texts by African American authors because of our country’s long legacy of slavery of African American peoples, which contributed to America’s economic and geopolitical power, and because Black/White relations have historically been, and continue to be, contentious, as witnessed most recently in Ferguson, Missouri.

Daniels advises that literature circles be kept small, ideally 3–4 students. We had five total literature circles, with four groups consisting of four students and one group consisting of five students. Students were randomly assigned to groups by counting off. In most cases, this meant students were separated from their friends in the class, whom they usually sat beside, and instead were challenged to engage with different ideas and orientations.

Daniels explains that literature circle *roles* can act as “book club training wheels” to help structure the group activity, and describes the four “basic” roles that can be used to structure the small-group literature discussion (i.e., connector, questioner, literary luminary, and illustrator). Because we wanted to keep

the focus of students' readings and discussion on developing understandings about the historical context of racism in the US, we had multiple students in each group take on different connector roles with *Copper Sun*, as well as an illustrator role and an additional role of "travel tracer." We posed history-based questions for the connector roles, which required students to research the slave trade, the Middle Passage, rice cultivation in the South, work conditions for slaves on southern plantations, Fort Mose, White slave owners' rationalization of slavery, rape/miscegenation, and abolition.

For *Monster*, questions posed for the connector roles required students to research current statistics on youth of color in juvenile detention centers, Malcolm X and Marcus Garvey (the names of a boulevard and park mentioned in *Monster*), and lynching (the judge tells Steve at one point, "We don't drag people out of their beds in the middle of the night and lynch them" [p. 26]). The groups met three times to discuss *Copper Sun* and share role activities, and three times to discuss *Monster*. The groups met for an hour during each class meeting. Students switched roles for each group meeting.

For the Alexander chapters, we used larger, modified jigsawed groups, primarily because we wanted the students to experience another type of reading/discussion activity. Jigsaw is a cooperative learning strategy that enables each student of a "home" group to specialize in one aspect of a topic. Students meet with members from other groups who are assigned the same aspect and, after mastering the material, return to the "home" group and teach the material to their group members. With this strategy, each student in the "home" group serves as a piece of the topic's puzzle; when they work together as a whole, they create the complete jigsaw puzzle. The strategy is known for aiding comprehension and helping to improve listening and communication skills (Jigsaw, 2014).

For our purposes, we had the entire class read the "Introduction" in Alexander's book. Then we split the class into two "home" groups, having them count off 1-2 in each group. All of the 1s in each "home" group were assigned to read and discuss Ch. 1 in Alexander's book in an "expert" group. All of the 2s were assigned to read and discuss Ch. 2 in Alexander's book in an "expert" group. Then students returned to

their home groups to describe and summarize their chapters and share insights gained and connections made to other course readings, including the young adult texts.

Students also wrote weekly journal reflections about the readings, using Bishop's "windows," "mirrors," and "sliding glass doors" metaphor as a response frame. While our future research agenda includes analyzing the preservice teachers' understandings of the YA fiction, nonfiction, and their own racial identities through Bishop's lenses and the discussion activities, for the purposes of this article, we focus on the students' responses to the use of the YAL and nonfiction readings as course texts.

Once the literature circle and jigsaw discussions were completed, we asked students to respond to the following questions in their final journal entry: What do you think about the use of the readings of YA fiction and nonfiction in this class? What do you see as connections between the YA fiction and the nonfiction we read in this course? One response per research participant was analyzed, for a total of 19 responses.

The following questions guided our analysis of the journal responses: What kind of response did the pairing of YA fiction and adult nonfiction provoke? What did the students write about? What, if any, impact did the pairing of the YA fiction with the nonfiction have on students' understandings of their own personal identities, institutionalized racism, and antiracist teaching? We read and reread the journal entries multiple times and looked for general themes and patterns in the data. Four themes that emerged from the data were: 1) empathetic readings; 2) awareness (and burgeoning ownership of) White privilege; 3) awareness of connections between racism and Discourse (the power to name); and 4) tensions around implications for future teaching. We discuss these in more detail below.

---

**Through this work, it became evident that both the fiction and nonfiction texts served as critical witnesses to our preservice teachers, but in different ways.**

---

## Improving Our Practice: What We Learned

### Impact of the Multicultural YA Fiction

Through this work, it became evident that both the fiction and nonfiction texts served as critical witnesses to our preservice teachers, but in different ways.

Students repeatedly expressed that the shift from traditional academic readings to multicultural YA fiction in a college course had the most profound impact on their understanding of slavery and discrimination, but more important, the YA fiction evoked empathy for the characters in the story and promoted a desire to work toward social change. One student documented how the books served as a critical witness for her, stating:

Reading *Copper Sun* and *Monster* made these injustices more real. . . . When I read a story written in first person about a person who experienced these travesties, I have a strong emotional reaction. . . . It's easy to get bogged down by numbers and statistics, but when you're faced with someone who actually experiences injustice, it's hard to turn away.

The very notion that engaging in the YA fiction made it “hard to turn away” speaks to the power of the literature to move preservice teachers to action. Another student remarked, “The young adult novels had a greater effect on me emotionally because I felt like I was experiencing these injustices with the characters.”

In addition, for the preservice teachers in the class, the multicultural YA fiction provided a new or sometimes renewed sense of commitment to address injustices through their teaching. This was the kind of connection that appeared to be missing for previous cohorts of students. Racial identity development (Helms, 1990) is often prompted by an initial encounter that makes a person aware of his/her race. For students with limited possibilities to experience such encounters, multicultural YA fiction seemed to be the catalyst they needed to be moved to action. The multicultural YA fiction helped the preservice teachers to “experience injustice” from the perspective of marginalized individuals.

### Impact of the Paired Reading of Fiction and Nonfiction

While the multicultural YA fiction seemed to provoke an empathic response, the combination of the YA fiction with the nonfiction readings led to new insights for many of the students, especially about White privi-

lege. We think this occurred because the preservice teachers came to see White privilege at work in their lives simply by understanding how they were exempt from the experiences shared by Draper, Myers, and Alexander. White privilege, or White racial hegemony, can be defined as the advantages—the social capital and material benefits—that White people “accrue simply by virtue of being constructed as white” (Leonardo, 2013, p. 137). As Rothenberg (2012) explains, “White privilege is the other side of racism. Unless we name it, we are in danger of wallowing in guilt or moral outrage with no idea of how to move beyond them” (p. 1).

Like many other antiracist educators, we used Peggy McIntosh's (1990) seminal article “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” early in the course to help students understand the concept of and “name” White privilege and its connections to systemic, structural racism, but our recollections of class discussion about the article are that students were quiet and seemingly “emotionally paralyzed” by the information, similar to the White teacher candidates in Solomon et al.'s 2006 study.

But by the end of the course, after having read the young adult novels and the Alexander chapters, several students seemed to recognize White privilege, and even their own Whiteness. As Mary (student names are pseudonyms) wrote:

Learning about the statistics of race in the court systems helped me realize the advantage I have in the system. Even though I did not ask for the advantage, I would have a better chance of winning a case because of the . . . skin I was born into. It was not until reading these books, learning about the statistics, and looking at the Alexander chapters that I began to really see the disadvantage young men of color face. In the back of my mind I had always been made aware of these facts, but until this class they were simply facts. Reading in this class helped me put faces to the young men facing disadvantages in the legal system which made the topic become a reality for me.

Jillian also gained similar insights:

Both the novels and the [Alexander chapters] bring out that being White gets you out of a lot of the things. . . . In trial, White people will receive a lesser sentence. White people are less likely to be suspected and accused of a crime in the first place. White people are also more likely to hold power over others, even when not in a position of power.

Some students also began to connect White privilege to White supremacy and to acknowledge that the ra-

cial caste system Alexander describes still exists today. Samantha wrote in her journal:

The overall issue and theme in all of our readings, including *Monster*, *Copper Sun*, and *The New Jim Crow*, seems to come down to the issue of present-day slavery in our country. No, slavery for the most part does not exist in the same form that we saw in *Copper Sun*. However, it has simply altered in form. To me, the disparity in incarceration that we see present in *Monster* and the excerpts from *The New Jim Crow* is simply an alternate form of slavery to promote and sustain white supremacy.

The combination of the fiction and nonfiction readings also seemed to help the students see how the perpetuation of stereotypical, negative discourses about people of color—from the description of slaves as animals and savages in *Copper Sun* to the title of “monster” that Steve tries to resist—helps to maintain a racial caste system. Tara wrote in her journal, “All of these readings . . . point out the ideas of Black people being savages or monsters or lower than others. The term ‘thug’ is a modern day way of saying this about people of color. It’s never really gone away, the words have just changed.” Similarly, Carrie wrote: “The word ‘savage’ used in *Copper Sun* can be interchanged with the word ‘monster’ in *Monster* and the common word ‘thug’ used today. All of these terms exist as ways to dehumanize and vilify the black race, thus instilling unnecessary fear in whites.” Mary echoed these ideas in her journal:

In Michelle Alexander’s book as well as *Copper Sun* and *Monster*, there are clear discriminatory labels placed on people of color. In Alexander’s nonfiction reading, black people are automatically labeled as criminals, threats, and the “source of the problem.” In *Copper Sun*, black people are labeled as savage, slaves, and property. In *Monster*, black people are labeled as trouble makers, criminals, and monsters. But through all three, the problem is clear. Because of skin color, people of color have been viewed in a negative manner pushing injustice and inequality in a variety of settings throughout history.

Finally, the paired reading of the YA fiction and nonfiction helped some students see racism as a “bigger system.” Karen wrote: “In reading *Monster*, the reader can sympathize with Steve, but we may not be able to see how Steve plays a role in a bigger system where people of color are criminalized and imprisoned for the profit of others. Michelle Alexander’s book may be less of a page-turner than *Monster*, but the

ideas she suggests helped me to better understand the scale of the issue.”

Ultimately, the preservice teachers seemed to think the YA fiction paired with the nonfiction was beneficial to their learning.

As Mary wrote in her journal, “One without the other would not have produced the same results for me. In combination, they opened my eyes wider to the subjects discussed than one could have done on its own.” Jillian had similar sentiments, as expressed in her journal: “Reading the YAL alongside Alexander’s academic piece gave a multifaceted and therefore more complete picture of modern day racism. Had we only read *Monster*, I may be able to dismiss his case as a ‘one-time’ deal or had I only read Alexander’s piece, I wouldn’t attach a personal emotional meaning.”

---

**Ultimately, the preservice teachers seemed to think the YA fiction paired with the nonfiction was beneficial to their learning.**

---

### Can I Get a Witness?

As we had hoped, teacher education students’ opportunities to read the YA novels *Copper Sun* and *Monster* in an urban elementary education course helped them to see themselves in relation to the marginalized other. The *New Jim Crow* furthered this endeavor by demonstrating how current inequities are linked to systemic and historical oppression. The pairing of multicultural YA fiction and adult nonfiction enhanced the extent to which the readings served as critical witnesses to preservice teachers.

Ultimately, through the readings, students were exposed to complex ideas—not as obscure theoretical frameworks, but through the experiences of individuals, which opened up possibilities for understanding difficult concepts. We feel that as a result of the paired readings, many students were able to come to these understandings on their own. Some students even experienced the nuances inherent in race, class, and gender intersectionality. However, students seemed moved most by the empathy they developed for the characters in the YA fiction. For the preservice teachers, their view of minorities as mere victims of

discrimination was transformed as they began to see these individuals as fully human. It is through these connections that critical witnessing occurred.

## Where Do We Go From Here?

For students who had already solidified their commitment to antiracist teaching, the paired readings made them think more critically about what they would teach once they were in their own classrooms. Penelope shared:

I appreciated reading the young adult novels because I often struggle to find viable materials to use with students that deal with the topics that our history textbooks leave out . . . *Monster* . . . showed me a new way to look at teaching materials for my future students. . . . I can see a lot of ways that *Monster* could be used to help kids build an understanding of how justice is racialized in America (just as Alexander points out with her chapter titled “The Color of Justice”). I can definitely imagine myself using this book in a variety of ways—to talk about the criminal justice system, police brutality, contemporary issues, as well as to open kids’ eyes to the structural injustices present in our society.

Rather than a response of empathy and commitment to social justice, students like Penelope who had already solidified that commitment gave more thought to how they would engage their students with texts that could, in turn, provoke a powerful response. This movement toward emancipatory teaching practices that promote engagement, teach students to “read the world,” understand injustice, and work toward change is our larger goal.

As we continue to work with this cohort, we grapple with ways to build on what they learned during the pre-intern semester. Their engagement with YAL only sparked the beginning of the racial identity development process for many students, and while they reported a new or sometimes renewed commitment to social justice, we were unsure as to whether some of these gains would be lost over the summer months when most students could readily disengage from issues of equity.

As students entered the first semester of their internship year, we shared with them accounts of violence and unjust acts committed against people of color over the summer months. Media accounts of the killing of unarmed Black men like Michael Brown and Eric Garner by police and the arrest of Charles Belk

served as reminders of why a commitment to antiracist teaching is necessary for Whites *and* students of color.

But even with exposure to such incidents, we recognize that some students actively resist the notion that racism is endemic and are not quite sure why this matters to them or how it can or should be connected to teaching. When asked in anonymous class evaluations what contributed most to their learning, one student stated, “It depends on what you want to call ‘learning.’ I think I’ve ‘learned’ a lot but I don’t think that [we learned] anything about teaching.” Still, there were students who thought the course was “amazing” and that it “stretched their thinking.” There are students who are thinking critically about what is happening in the schools where they serve as interns. Penelope, in particular, has noticed disparities in how students are disciplined based on race and is thinking about how to engage in more productive and equitable classroom management strategies.

As the students in the 2014 cohort continue on their trajectory through the program, they will engage in community mapping activities and action research projects and engage frameworks that reenvision pedagogy and practice. We continue to think through the myriad ways our students could translate what they have learned into classroom practice and social justice advocacy in contexts both in and out of the classroom. Our success with YAL as a tool for inciting interests and commitment to antiracist teaching is only the first step in what we hope will be a lifetime of learning and renewed commitment to social justice.

*Dr. Chonika Coleman-King received her Ph.D. in Teaching, Learning, and Curriculum from the University of Pennsylvania. Prior to pursuing doctoral studies, Chonika worked as an elementary school teacher in Prince George’s County, Maryland. Chonika’s research interests include the development of critically conscious teachers, urban education, and the experiences of Black immigrant and Black American youth in US schools. Chonika recently published a book titled The (Re-)Making of a Black American: Tracing the Racial and Ethnic Socialization of Caribbean American Youth and is currently assistant professor of Urban-Multicultural Education at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.*

*Susan L. Groenke is associate professor of English Education at the University of Tennessee and directs the Center*

for *Children's and Young Adult Literature on the UTK campus*. Susan teaches courses on young adult literature and secondary English methods. Her research interests center on adolescent reading engagement and the motivation to read. When she is not reading young adult novels, she can be found walking her dog, Bootleg, or driving down the road with her husband in their 1978 VW bus.

## References

- Alexander, M. (2012). *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. New York, NY: The New Press.
- Bishop, R. S. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom*, 6(3), ix–xi.
- Christian, J. C. (2014). A conversation with Michelle Alexander. *Teaching Tolerance*, 48, 31–33.
- Daniels, H. (2002). *Literature circles: Voice and choice in literature circles and reading groups* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
- de la Peña, M. (2008). *Mexican whiteboy*. New York, NY: Delacorte.
- de la Peña, M. (2009). *We were here*. New York, NY: Delacorte.
- Draper, S. (2006). *Copper sun*. New York, NY: Atheneum.
- Draper, S. (2014). *Sharon Draper: Copper sun*. Retrieved from <http://sharondraper.com/bookdetail.asp?id=20>.
- Glenn, W. J. (2006). Trusting texts that trust our students: Controversial young adult titles worth teaching. *English Journal*, 96(2), 88–92.
- Glenn, W. J. (2012). Developing understandings of race: Preservice teachers' counter-narrative (re)constructions of people of color in young adult literature. *English Education*, 44, 326–353.
- Glenn, W. J. (2013). To witness and testify: Preservice teachers examine literary aesthetics to better understand diverse literature. *English Education*, 46, 90–116.
- Groenke, S. L., Haddix, M., Glenn, W. J., Kirkland, D. E., Price-Dennis, D., & Coleman-King, C. (2015). Disrupting and dismantling the dominant vision of youth of color. *English Journal*, 104(3), 35–40.
- Groenke, S., & Maples, J. (2009). Small openings in cyberspace: Preparing preservice teachers to facilitate critical race talk. In S. L. Groenke & A. J. Hatch (Eds.), *Critical pedagogy and teacher education in the neoliberal era: Small openings*. (pp. 173–189). New York: Springer.
- Groenke, S., Maples, J. & Henderson, J. (2010). "Raising 'hot topics' through young adult literature." *Voices from the Middle*, 17(4), 29–36.
- Groenke, S.L. & Youngquist, M. (2011). Are we postmodern yet? Reading *Monster* with 9<sup>th</sup> graders. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 54(7), 505–513.
- Haddix, M., & Price-Dennis, D. (2013). Urban fiction and multicultural literature as transformative tools for preparing English teachers for diverse classrooms. *English Education*, 45, 247–283.
- Helms, J. E. (Ed.). (1990). *Black and white racial identity: Theory, research, and practices*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Howard, G. R. (2006). *We can't teach what we don't know: White teachers, multiracial schools*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Jigsaw. (2014). Retrieved September 3, 2014, from <http://www.readingrockets.org/strategies/jigsaw>.
- Leonardo, Z. (2013). The color of supremacy: Beyond the discourse of "white privilege." *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 36, 137–152.
- Levine-Rasky, C. (2000). The practice of whiteness amongst teacher candidates. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 10, 263–184.
- Lopate, P. (2013). *To show and to tell: The craft of literary nonfiction*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- López, T. A. (2009). Reading trauma and violence in US Latina/o children's literature. In M. P. Stewart & Y. Atkinson (Eds.), *Ethnic literary traditions in American children's literature* (pp. 205–226). NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- McIntosh, P. (1990). White privilege: Unpacking the privilege knapsack. *Independent School*, 49(2) 31–35.
- Milner, R. (2010). *Start where you are, but don't stay there*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Milner, R., & Laughter, J. (2014). But good intentions are not enough: Preparing teachers to center race and poverty. *Urban Review*. Retrieved from <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs11256-014-0295-4#page-1>.
- Myers, W. D. (1999). *Monster*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Rothenberg, P. S. (2012). *White privilege: Essential readings on the other side of racism* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Worth.
- Sapphire. (1997). *Push*. New York, NY: Vintage Press.
- Sims (Bishop), R. (1982). *Shadow and substance: Afro-American experience in contemporary children's fiction*. Urbana, IL: NCTE.
- Solomon, P. R., Portelli, J. P., Daniel, B., & Campbell, A. (2006). The discourse of denial: How white teacher candidates construct race, racism, and "white privilege." *Race, Ethnicity, and Education*, 8, 147–169.
- Souljah, S. (2006). *The coldest winter ever*. New York, NY: Pocket Star.
- Trainor, J. S. (2005). "My ancestors didn't own slaves": Understanding white talk about race. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 40, 140–167.
- Willis, A. I. & Parker, K. N. (2009). "O, say, do you see?": Using critical race theory to inform English language arts instruction. In C. Compton-Lilly (Ed.), *Breaking the silence: Recognizing the social and cultural resources students bring to the classroom* (pp. 34–48). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Woodson, J. (2008). *After Tupac & D Foster*. New York, NY: Putnam.

## Complicating Race:

Representation and Resistance Using Arab and Asian American Immigrant Fictions

**H**istorically, 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,

---

**Teaching immigrant fictions has the potential to disrupt harmful conceptions and constructions of race and ethnicity . . . while simultaneously highlighting the role that race still plays in the experiences of students of color.**

---

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-

---

**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.**

---

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

---

**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.**

---

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).

---

**By introducing the social construction of race in the context of two books . . . the students seemed less defensive than in previous years and were more willing to discuss how their perspectives . . . informed their readings of the texts.**

---

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.**

---

**Brandon Sams** is assistant professor of English Education at Auburn University. His research interests include literature and writing pedagogy, teacher education, and humanities education for/as social justice. His publications have appeared in *Curriculum Inquiry*, *Educational Studies*, and *English Leadership Quarterly*. He is currently researching the potential of aesthetic and contemplative reading practices to interrupt and renew “schooling” reading practices shaped by the epistemologies of audit culture.

**Dr. Kate Allman** is a faculty member in the Program in Education at Duke University. Her research specializes in Arab immigration and education and the integration of Arab and Arab American literature in the secondary English classroom.

## References

- Atwell, N. (1998). *In the middle: New understandings about writing, reading, and learning*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.
- Baker, E. (2002). Flying while Arab: Racial profiling and air travel security. *Journal of Air Law and Commerce*, 67, 1375.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Botzakis, S., Burns, L., & Hall, L. A. (2014). Literacy reform and common core standards: Recycling the autonomous model. *Language Arts*, 91, 223–235.
- Blau, S. (2003). *The literature workshop: Teaching texts and their readers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Caglar, A. S. (1997). Hyphenated identities and the limits of “culture.” In T. Modood & P. Werbner (Eds.), *The politics of multiculturalism in the new Europe: Racism, identity, and community* (pp. 169–185). London, UK: Zed.
- Cainkar, L., & Read, J. N. G. (2014). Arab Americans and gender. In S. Nassar-McMillan, K. Arjouch, & J. Hakim-Larson (Eds.), *Biopsychosocial perspectives on Arab Americans* (pp. 89–105). New York, NY: Springer.
- Clements, R., & Musker, J. (Directors). (1992). *Aladdin* [Motion picture]. United States: Walt Disney Pictures.
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2012). *Critical race theory: An introduction*. New York, NY: NYU Press.
- DiAngelo, R. (2011). White fragility. *The International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, 3(3), 54–70.
- Enciso, P. (2011). Storytelling in critical literacy pedagogy: Removing the walls between immigrant and non-immigrant youth. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, 10(1), 21–40.
- Figueroa, P. (2012). *Education and the social construction of “race”* [Routledge Library Editions: Education, Vol. 120]. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Frankenberg, R. (Ed.). (1997). *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in social and cultural criticism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Freire, P. (1993). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. Ramos, Trans.). New York, NY: Continuum.
- Fuss, D. (Ed.). (1991). *Inside/out: Lesbian theories, gay theories*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Gee, J. P., & Green, J. L. (1998). Discourse analysis, learning, and social practice: A methodological study. *Review of Research in Education*, 23, 119–169.
- Gualtieri, S. (2009). *Between Arab and White: Race and ethnicity in the early Syrian American diaspora*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Jamal, A. A., & Naber, N. C. (Eds.). (2008). *Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11: From invisible citizens to visible subjects*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
- Kabbani, N. S., & Kamel, N. (2007). Youth exclusion in Syria: Social, economic, and institutional dimensions. Retrieved from <http://www.gsdc.org/go/display&type=Document&id=3241>.
- Kahf, M. (2006). *The girl in the tangerine scarf: A novel*. New York, NY: Carroll & Graf.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32, 465–491.
- Locke, T., & Cleary, A. (2011). Critical literacy as an approach to literary study in the multicultural, high-school classroom. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, 10(1), 119–139.
- López, G. R. (2003). The (racially neutral) politics of education: A critical race theory perspective. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 39, 68–94.
- McIntosh, P. (1988). White privilege and male privilege: A personal account of coming to see correspondences through work in women’s studies (Working paper no. 189). Wellesley, MA: Wellesley College Center for Research on Women.
- Martinez, G. A. (1997). The legal construction of race: Mexican-Americans and Whiteness. *Harvard Latino Law Review*, 2, 321.
- McCarthy, C. (1998). Educating the American popular: Suburban resentment and the representation of the inner city in contemporary film and television. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 1, 31–48.
- McGee, A. (2011). Climbing walls: Attempting critical pedagogy as a 21st-century pre-service teacher. *Language Arts*, 88, 270–277.
- Payne, R. (1996). *A framework for understanding poverty*. Highlands, TX: aha! Process.
- Perea, J. F. (1997). The Black/White binary paradigm of race: The “normal science” of American racial thought. *California Law Review*, 85, 1213–1258.
- Petersen, W. (1966). Success story, Japanese-American style. *New York Times Magazine*, 9, 20–21.
- Rothenberg, P. (2004). *Invisible privilege*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas.
- Said, E. W. (1985). Orientalism reconsidered. *Cultural Critique*, 1, 89–107.
- Schieble, M. (2014). Reading images in American born Chinese through critical visual literacy. *English Journal*, 103(5), 47–52.
- Shaheen, J. (2001). *Reel bad Arabs: How Hollywood vilifies a people*. Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press.

- Sirin, S. R., & Fine, M. (2007). Hyphenated selves: Muslim American youth negotiating their identities across the fault lines of global conflict. *Applied Developmental Science, 11*, 151–163.
- Sirin, S., & Fine, M. (2008). *Muslim American youth: Understanding hyphenated identities through multiple methods*. New York, NY: NYU Press.
- Sharp, G., & Wade, L. (2011). Illustrating the social construction of race and racial stereotypes with images. Retrieved from <http://trails.asanet.org/Pages/Resource.aspx?ResourceID=12558>.
- Sleeter, C. E., & Combleth, C. (2011). *Teaching with vision: Culturally responsive teaching in standards-based classrooms*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Smiley, A. D., & Helfenbein, R. J. (2011). Becoming teachers: The Payne effect. *Multicultural Perspectives, 13*, 5–15.
- Solomon, R. P., Portelli, J. P., Daniel, B. J., & Campbell, A. (2005). The discourse of denial: How white teacher candidates construct race, racism, and “white privilege.” *Race, Ethnicity, and Education, 8*, 147–169.
- Tehrani, J. (2009). *Whitewashed: America's invisible Middle Eastern minority*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Trainor, J. S. (2005). “My ancestors didn’t own slaves”: Understanding White talk about race. *Research in the Teaching of English, 40*, 140–167.
- Trier, J. (2005). “Sordid fantasies”: Reading popular “inner-city” school films as racialized texts with pre-service teachers. *Race, Ethnicity, and Education, 8*, 171–189.
- US Census Bureau. (2000). *The foreign-born population in the United States: 2000*. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/p23-206.pdf>.
- Walkowitz, R. (2010). *Immigrant fictions: Contemporary literature in an age of globalization*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Wu, F. H. (2002). *Yellow: Race in America beyond Black and White*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Yang, G. L. (2006). *American born Chinese*. New York, NY: Macmillan.

# Understanding Diversity in a Global Context:

## Preservice Teachers' Encounters with Postcolonial Young Adult Literature

In my work with preservice teachers, I have struggled to find ways to engage global perspectives on diversity. Because I am a woman of color and an immigrant, my students and I have examined my experiences growing up in Haiti and moving to the US in order to explore a viewpoint on race and culture that differs from US constructs and considers the global context of migration and immigration. My experiences, while valuable in the classroom on many levels, also present a limited perspective on the issues. As a result, my courses now almost always include stories that feature young adults of color living outside the cultural context of the US. According to Cart (2010) and Koss and Teale (2009), such narratives are not only underrepresented in the young adult literature market—in stark contrast to an increasingly diverse student population—they also provide potential benefits for all students. As the editors assert in the call for this issue of *The ALAN Review*:

For all readers, exposure to a variety of ethnically unfamiliar literature can encourage critical reading of text and world, recognition of the limitations of depending upon mainstream depictions of people and their experiences, and the building of background knowledge and expansion of worldview.

In the current context of English Education, it seems particularly important to create multiple opportunities for preservice teachers to cultivate this expansive and critical worldview so that they may be better equipped to address the needs of the ethnically diverse students in their future classes.

In this article, I describe a conversation in which five preservice teachers discussed the novel *Now*

*Is the Time for Running* (Williams, 2011) as part of a research study involving a book club focused on postcolonial young adult literature. I argue that reading and discussing postcolonial literature in a book club—exploring cultures around the world that have been transformed by and have emerged from a state of colonial oppression—can provide valuable critical insights for future teachers as they reflect on similar local and national issues and as they prepare to teach in culturally diverse classrooms.

### Postcolonial Literature and Teacher Education

A review of research on multicultural education with preservice teachers reveals that although preservice teachers increasingly recognize the value of multiculturalism, they struggle to achieve a complex understanding of cultural issues and structures of inequity (Castro, 2010). Castro explains:

Preservice teachers may readily advocate and clamor for multicultural education that supports a tolerance approach to diversity without achieving the critical consciousness necessary to dismantle structural inequity and interrogate dominant cultural assumptions embedded in these structural arrangements. (p. 206)

As preservice teachers prepare to take on the roles of educators, they need to acquire more critical understandings of the ways in which inequities are maintained through institutions and sociocultural practices. Phillion and He (2004) suggest that using “memoirs, autobiographies, and novels that focus on the inti-

mate, daily experiences of diverse families, parents, students, and teachers” (p. 6) may be an effective way to engage preservice teachers in developing a sense of “world citizenship” through which “students learn to step out of their comfort zone, to challenge assumptions and question taken-for-granted truths, to experience differences, and to make connections between the worlds they live and the worlds of others” (p. 5).

Postcolonial literature provides numerous pedagogical opportunities for preservice teachers to develop such insights. Dimitriadis and McCarthy (2001) argue that education has struggled to address the social and cultural transformations of recent large-scale developments, such as globalization, migration, and new technologies, that have exploded the range of information, images, and identities available to people (p. 1). The authors suggest that because postcolonial arts—including literature—developed in response to colonization, they “speak to the complicated interrelations between the first world and the Third World” (p. 3) and offer unique insights and potential directions. Likewise, Tarc (2009) suggests that postcolonial literature engages in “ethico-aesthetic pedagogy” when it reconstructs traumatic colonial histories and depicts characters that transcend them, thus compelling readers “to think and act differently in the world with all sentient beings” (p. 196).

Educators who use postcolonial literature have noted both the possibilities and limitations of putting postcolonial theories to work in teacher education and secondary literature classrooms. For instance, students from immigrant and/or marginalized cultures have responded positively to reading postcolonial literature with characters that mirror their own experiences, struggles, and identities (Bean, 2004; Lucas, 1990; Willinsky, 2006). However, some students have resisted a curriculum that challenges their worldviews (Johnston, 2003), and preservice teachers and students from dominant cultures have struggled to engage with literature and pedagogical approaches that contest a traditional and Eurocentric curriculum (Asher, 2005; Goldblatt, 1998; Saldanha, 2000). Finally, teacher educators have pointed to the limits of using literary texts as “authentic” cultural representations when readers are outsiders to the culture depicted (Crocco, 2005; Mangat & Johnston, 2000; Freeman & Lehman, 2001). These limits indicate that students and teachers need to develop strategies

to read all texts critically (Freeman & Lehman, 2001; Mangat & Johnston, 2000).

## Research Design

The conversation I describe in this article is drawn from a larger research study that took place at a public university in the US South in the fall of 2011 (Durand, 2012). In the original study, two groups of preservice English teachers explored postcolonial texts in a book club setting. This article focuses on one group’s discussion of the young adult novel *Now Is the Time for Running* by Michael Williams (2011). In the following subsections, I provide details about the participants and the qualitative research methodology that guided the processes of data collection and analysis.

## Methodology

Connelly and Clandinin (2006) explain that a story is a “portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful”

(p. 375). This phenomenon of making meaning out of experience through story is central to the function of book clubs. For example, Kooy’s (2006) study of novice teachers in a book club reveals that “the book club allows them to read and use stories as heuristics and explanatory devices for making sense of their worlds in a social, relational, safe context” (p. 662). In the research study described in this article, participants encountered several stories: the narrative of the character in the novel, their own and their peers’ responses to the texts, their narratives of personal or teaching experiences, as well as my own responses (as the participant observer) to the texts and my relevant personal and teaching experiences. Thus, I looked to narrative inquiry—“the study of experience as story” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 375)—as the method through which I explored, analyzed, and represented the interplay of these narratives.

---

**A review of research on multicultural education with preservice teachers reveals that . . . they struggle to achieve a complex understanding of cultural issues and structures of inequity (Castro, 2010).**

---

## Participants

I recruited research participants from two courses required for the English Education program at the university. The research participants discussed in this article were five undergraduate students enrolled in

a young adult literature course with a service-learning component: Elnora, a Black female beginning her second year at the university; Joel, a White male in his third year; Lauren, a White female in her final year; Lexy, a White female in her final year; and Nick, a White male in his final year. Four of the participants were officially admitted to the program, and the fifth intended to apply. The professor of the course allowed these

students' participation in the study to count as their service-learning project. In all, the group held five book discussions on the university campus but met independently from the course. Prior to the first book club discussion, I held an hour-long information session during which participants reviewed and/or completed Institutional Review Board (IRB) consent forms and had the opportunity to choose pseudonyms for themselves.

This narrative study used a “conversational, interactive, [and] communicative model of inquiry” (Bochner, 2005, p. 66) in which the participants and the researcher take part in a collaborative relationship. As Bochner (2005) writes, “Instead of spectators, we [researchers] become agents and participants” (p. 66). Thus, as a participant observer, my role was to facilitate the discussions and provide insights on the postcolonial context of the books as needed. At the start of the first meeting, for example, I gave a brief orientation on relevant terms and issues in postcolonial literature (e.g., defining “colonial” and “postcolonial,” listing the countries involved, defining “postcolonial literature,” and reviewing themes in postcolonial literature, such as the relationships between colonizer and colonized, identity, and diaspora). I also recommended specific texts for their geographic diversity and rep-

resentations of nations with a history of colonization to ensure that postcolonial themes were prevalent in the stories. Likewise, participants volunteered several titles (many of which I had not previously read) that they thought fit the criteria for book selection or that addressed the interests of their particular group; group members voted on what to read at the next meeting.

Our group discussions were open-ended and informal, and participants generated discussion questions in addition to my own. This collaborative aspect of the study extended beyond our last meeting: participants had the opportunity to review the findings of the study in various stages of completion—transcriptions of group discussions, drafts of the findings, and the final report—to determine whether these were accurate representations of their experiences in the book club.

## Data Collection

Because readers make sense of their reading experiences at multiple stages, I collected data before, during, and after each of our meetings. Book discussions ranged from 60–90 minutes and were audiotaped and later transcribed. In the first session, participants turned in an initial questionnaire, which I provided prior to the meeting. It asked participants to share their reason(s) for joining the book club, to describe their personal and literary experiences with international cultures and issues, and to consider the role young adult literature might play in initiating conversations about these issues with their future students. The remaining sessions focused on discussing the texts selected.

Before each meeting, participants wrote a response to the focal text, detailing in writing their reactions, thoughts, feelings, and questions about the events and characters in the novels. I took notes during the meetings and wrote memos after each session to reflect on the group discussion, including the mood and tone of the conversation. After the final discussion session, I emailed participants a follow-up questionnaire asking them to reflect on their individual and group experiences of reading and discussing postcolonial young adult literature, to share what they learned through the novels, and to articulate the challenges and possibilities they could foresee in implementing book clubs and postcolonial young adult literature in their own teaching. In all, I collected five sets of data:

---

## Educators who use postcolonial literature have noted both the possibilities and limitations of putting postcolonial theories to work in teacher education and secondary literature classrooms.

---

1) an initial questionnaire, 2) participants' written responses to each novel, 3) transcriptions of five discussions, 4) notes taken during and reflective memos written after each discussion, and 5) a follow-up questionnaire. Participants' comments in this article are drawn from all of these data sets.

### Data Analysis

The following research questions guided the study: What stories, events, or issues emerge for preservice teachers as they read postcolonial narratives? In what ways do the novels serve as entry points into conversations about their own experiences and issues related to global, cultural, political, or historical events? How do preservice teachers connect the book club experience, their readings, and responses to their future teaching?

In order to begin deriving themes and categories from the data to answer these questions, I referred to Maykut and Morehouse's (1994) constant comparison method and Riessman's (2008) thematic analysis approach. The initial discovery process involved reading the data multiple times and generating a list of recurring concepts, phrases, topics, and patterns to create provisional categories. I organized the data, which I sectioned into "units of meaning" (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 128), under these provisional categories and created new categories as needed. Because "[s]tories told in group settings . . . typically emerge in fragments, with each speaker adding a thread that expands (or corrects) what another member contributed" (Riessman, 2008, p. 123), some units of meaning included "extended stretches" of conversations with multiple speakers—those "instances in which different members explore a topic in some depth over an extended number of turns" (Beach & Yussen, 2011, p. 122).

In the next stage of analysis, I refined initial categories by writing propositional statements that served as rules for inclusion for each unit of meaning (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). For example, one participant's written response to *Now Is the Time for Running* (Williams, 2011) stated, "Since it's a fiction book, I thought the author exaggerated a lot of parts but I looked up the articles on Wikipedia about xenophobia in South Africa and the riots really were that bad." This response reflected the propositional statement, "Postcolonial stories are based on real historical

and contemporary events," in the category, "Postcolonial Realities," and was coded as such. A total of 11 categories were derived from the data collected in the larger study: "knowledge gaps and fragments," "learning through reading and inquiry," "addressing knowledge gaps as teachers," "revising assumptions through counter-narratives," "postcolonial realities," "cultural disconnect," "establishing connections," "relevance to students," "teaching approaches," "exploring prejudice," and "conceptualizing race, ethnicity, identity."

The final stage of data analysis involved reading and rereading the data, categories, and propositions to identify salient relationships across categories and how they addressed the research questions. For instance, it became clear that the three categories, "knowledge gaps and fragments," "learning through reading and inquiry," and "addressing knowledge gaps as teachers," explored different aspects of the same theme, so they were combined into a larger category, "expanding awareness of postcolonial issues." I combined and organized the coded data into three major themes: 1) expanding awareness of postcolonial issues, 2) establishing connections across difference, and 3) understanding postcolonial issues through stories. These themes guide the findings I discuss in the next three sections.

### Expanding Awareness of Postcolonial Issues

Most of the participants in this study indicated in their initial questionnaires and during our first meeting that they joined the book club in part because they were already interested in world cultures and wanted to learn more about postcolonial literature and young adult literature. As English Education undergraduate students, some were already familiar with global or postcolonial literature. For instance, two of the participants, Lexy and Lauren, had taken a college-level Modern Criticism course that was focused on postcolonial theory and literature. In addition, Lexy had taken a Caribbean studies course that included several novels and focused on the colonial and postcolonial

---

## What stories, events, or issues emerge for preservice teachers as they read postcolonial narratives?

---

history of the represented cultures. Other participants, like Joel and Elnora, recalled taking a World Literature course in high school, in which Joel remembered reading *Things Fall Apart* (Achebe, 1958) and *Cry, the Beloved Country* (Paton, 1948), and Elnora read stories about British colonialism in India. Elnora also shared that she had not been aware of the classification of postcolonial but had independently read several novels that would fit in that genre.

---

**As the story blurred the lines between fact and fiction, Elnora identified other aspects of the story she wanted to investigate.**

---

Nick was the only participant in the group who indicated that few of the texts he read throughout his schooling had focused on global issues and cultures.

At my suggestion, the participants picked *Now Is the Time for Running* (Williams, 2011) for our first

book club selection. This story takes place during the first decade of the new millennium. Fifteen-year-old Deo and his brother, Innocent, are the sole survivors of a brutal attack by soldiers on their hometown in Zimbabwe. After their narrow escape, they find the means to illegally cross the border into South Africa in search of their father. However, once in South Africa, they become targets of xenophobia—the fear and hatred of foreigners—because they are refugees. In the supplementary material at the end of the book, South African author Michael Williams reveals that the novel was inspired by the riots that took place in South Africa in 2008 when “[m]ore than sixty people, many of them migrants, were killed during attacks on foreigners throughout the country” (Williams, 2011, p. 232). A number of international newspapers covered the story, and one particularly graphic image was widely circulated as representing the extent of violence in the riots—a man set on fire (Underhill & Khumalo, 2010). Based on these incidents and on the author’s interviews with young refugees from Zimbabwe, the novel is a plausible representation of the social, political, and economic realities facing youth growing up “in the aftermath of colonialism” (Hickling-Hudson, Matthews, & Woods, 2004, p. 3).

None of the participants, myself included, had known about the riots prior to reading the novel. Upon learning that the story was inspired by actual

events, one participant took it upon herself to do additional research. In her written response to the story, Elnora stated, “Since it’s a fiction book, I thought the author exaggerated a lot of parts but I looked up the articles on Wikipedia about xenophobia in South Africa and the riots really were that bad.” In our meeting, when I asked Elnora what had inspired her to find out more information, she responded that she could not believe that people could be so cruel. She recounted her reaction after having researched these events: “I was just like, ‘Wow. This is really happening. And nobody seems to know about it.’” As the story blurred the lines between fact and fiction, Elnora identified other aspects of the story she wanted to investigate. She asked the group whether or not they had been aware of hyperinflation issues in Zimbabwe: “‘Cause, I really thought he [Deo] had a billion dollars. I was like, ‘Wait a minute!’” Here Elnora refers to a scene in which the main character, Deo, describes stuffing a billion dollars in his soccer ball:

I know where Amai [mom] hides our money. . . . I find several fifty million dollar notes, a few more hundred million dollars. There is no time to count it all. It’s not much, but it will buy us some food. . . . I stuff them into the leather pouch. The money fills out the ball nicely, and I find a piece of string and sew up the patch. I toss the ball into the air. Nobody will know I have a billion dollars in my soccer ball. (p. 32)

Elnora’s self-reflections describe her shift from reading the novel as fictional (“I really thought he had a billion dollars.”) to no longer being able to suspend her disbelief (“Wait a minute!”) about what seemed an excessive amount of money for a boy to have. In reconciling the fictional aspects of the story to the ones based on facts, hyperinflation did make it possible for Deo to be in possession of a billion dollars.

Similarly, Lauren made herself a note in her reading journal to look up the exchange rate to support the claims in this part of the story. In our discussion, she responded to Elnora: “I actually wrote down in my chapter-by-chapter thing—I’m like, ‘Need to look up exchange rate. Their dollar is obviously worth less.’” In these ways, the text selected for the study made it possible for participants to expand their awareness of regions of the world and contemporary events not typically explored in the curriculum, and it provided them with the impetus to do additional research about these events.



## Establishing Connections across Difference

The implied and sometimes graphic violence in the novel contrasted with the participants' desires for or expectations of young adult literature. For example, in our discussion of the novel, Lexy expressed that she felt "surprised at how depressing it [the story] was." She explained, "I guess just the beginning, you know—they're playing soccer. I'm thinking, 'Oh, this is going to be about kids playing soccer and whatever.' I just didn't think that any of it would get that real." Participants also discussed at length the ending of the novel, which they concluded is realistic but somewhat unresolved—a typical feature of postcolonial literature. Bradford, Mallan, Stephens, and McCallum (2008) explain that postcolonial narratives tend to "suggest transformative directions without proposing specific social and political orders" (p. 78). While the novel ends on a hopeful note, the fate of the main character remains uncertain, as it is dependent on larger sociopolitical changes.

Significantly, the text also revealed a tension between relational and differential experiences of adolescence for participants. On the one hand, the book depicts cultures, events, and places that fell outside of the participants' identities and sets of experiences and thus presented gaps or obstacles for establishing meaningful connections. On the other hand, the experience of coming of age was also familiar. During our conversation about the novel, Lexy touched upon this tension:

**Lexy:** [The novel] deals with things like none of us have ever experienced. But at the same time, there are those themes that we all know, like, you know, race hatred or like people, immigrants taking each other's, or taking jobs [. . .]. I think we all can like understand that, even though this person [Deo] has gone through really, really intense things.

**Sybil:** Good. So it's relatable is what you're saying. So, even though it's taking place outside of, I guess, *here*, you can still relate because it has similar . . .

**Lexy:** Right. And then you can't relate in some ways, which makes you, like, opens your eyes, I guess.

For Lexy, this novel contains elements that she could understand because of similar issues at play within the context of the US, such as racism and the ongoing national conversation about undocumented immigrants. However, there are also events with which she could not identify; while she does not name these events in this excerpt, Lexy does indicate that they were nevertheless eye-opening.

As the research participants had not had these experiences for themselves, they were sometimes unable to identify with characters or events in the stories we read. However, they used a variety of literacy skills to engage with the texts in meaningful ways. In this discussion, participants referred to videos and films they had seen about the region to help them make sense of the novel. For instance, Nick explained:

I couldn't really relate to this situation because obviously I've never been through anything that traumatic before, but I found myself thinking about movies set in similar situations, like *Hotel Rwanda* or *Blood Diamond*, like just about the corruption and the governments, how the people are so exploited. And that just kind of made it a little bit more real for me.

Nick also mentioned the science fiction thriller *District 9*, which is set in contemporary South Africa and also explores xenophobia:

I think it's similar to—I mean, it's a totally different storyline with aliens—but it's the exact same theme of xenophobia about two different cultures clashing, and they can't get along. One takes advantage of the other. And [it's] like, very, very depressing.

When I told him that I appreciated his references to films, Nick explained, "I just find that it's so easy to relate this to that," meaning relating the novels to the films or vice versa. Thus, Nick's experience with films that have depicted similar states of upheaval in various countries in Africa provided Nick with visual, geographical, and cultural references beyond his own lived experiences, ones he could draw upon to imagine and forge a connection to Deo's life.

---

**Significantly, the text also revealed a tension between relational and differential experiences of adolescence for participants.**

---

## Understanding Postcolonial Issues through Stories

One of the most significant findings of the study related to the way participants used an event in the stories as a “springboard” (Flood et al., 2008) for having complex conversations about salient postcolonial concerns such as identity, racism, xenophobia, refugee and immigrant issues, economics, and politics. In the following paragraphs, I examine an “extended stretch

---

**The group setting contributed to a complex discussion as each participant built on the previous comment and added a new element to the conversation, drawing from the novel, films, and their broader knowledge of social issues, resulting in a collective learning environment.**

---

of conversation” (Beach & Yussen, 2011) in which participants articulated their understanding of these issues. Specifically, I look at the ways in which participants build on one another’s comments, starting with the novel and extending the discussion to ongoing US national issues.

During our conversation about films, I also mentioned the movie *Invictus*, which depicts how Nelson Mandela used rugby to begin to bridge racial and social divides in post-Apartheid South Africa. Williams (2011) uses a similar device in *Now Is the Time for Running*, where soccer has the potential to bring together people from diverse cultures

and nationalities. However, one participant challenged the film’s hopeful ending for improved race relations because the novel shows how issues of prejudice persist in South Africa today. Joel responded by making a distinction between institutionalized racism and xenophobia:

**Joel:** Well, [. . .] in some ways it is [. . .] but it’s not Apartheid. Now it’s xenophobia and it’s outsiders. It’s not the race that matters; it’s “You are not a part of *our* group,” which, I don’t know if that’s better or worse.

**Sybil:** Let’s talk about that.

**Lexy:** It’s essentially the same thing though, right?

**Joel:** It really is. It’s just, it’s more of a, I guess it’s more of a civilized prejudice.

Although I asked Joel to elaborate on the phrase “civilized prejudice,” the conversation moved on with Nick stating the similarities between racism and xenophobia:

**Nick:** It’s still a bias against a group of people that’s different than you, and that’s all it boils down to, I think.

**Lauren:** Yeah, that’s how I feel about it. It’s—prejudice is prejudice.

**Nick:** And if anything, I feel like these people have been taken advantage of so widely in each of these countries that it would make sense for them to come together. But instead, they just, they tear each other apart. And it’s . . .

**Lexy:** I feel like it makes sense for them to come together in their country groups because [. . .] they all deal with pretty much the same stuff [. . .]. And I mean, racism and all that, it’s pretty much based on putting someone down to make yourself feel better. So, “Well, at least I’m White; at least I’m not Black,” that whole mentality. So I think that’s playing into what’s going on there. It’s like, “Well, at least I’m South African, and I’m not from Zimbabwe.”

While participants acknowledged the distinction between Apartheid and xenophobia, between race-based prejudice and prejudice based on culture or nationality, they maintained that the underlying motivations of intolerance and discrimination are the same. Thus, talk about prejudice remained at the individual level—the racist mentality Lexy describes—and did not extend to the ways in which institutions establish and maintain inequity.

In the next segment of the conversation, however, Joel added yet another layer of complexity when he made a connection between prejudice and economics. He referred to a part of the story when the main character, Deo, and his brother find work picking tomatoes

on a farm located near the border. At first, Deo can't believe his luck:

When we first arrived at the Flying Tomato Farm, I had to pinch myself every morning to make sure that I wasn't dreaming. Innocent and I had beds to sleep in, with our own blankets and pillows. We had a roof over our heads, and we weren't running. We ate two meals a day, and at the end of the month, we got fifty South African rands—almost seven billion Zim dollars each, just for picking tomatoes! (Williams, 2011, p. 114)

Deo is aware of the difference between Zimbabwe and South African currency, but not necessarily the extent to which the Zim dollar is devalued, because he thinks he is making a lot of money. However, during a soccer match with the children in the neighboring village, Deo is met with animosity by the locals who are out of work. He learns that he and his brother were hired only because they accept working for so little money, which is not actually a living wage. Joel referred to this scene when he made the connection between prejudice and the fight over resources, compounded by people who see an opportunity for making a profit by exploiting undocumented immigrants who cannot go to the police for fear of being deported:

**Joel:** And on the same level, there is [. . .] the economic aspect, how, when he [Deo] goes into the village, he sees all these people who are hungry because they got laid off so that the guy could pay so much less for . . . so that he could exploit the immigrants.

**Sybil:** When he first crosses the border and the job he gets at the tomato farm? [. . .]

**Joel:** I thought that was interes[ting]. 'Cause he goes into the village, and all these people, they *can't* work anymore because the foreman won't hire *non-immigrants* 'cause he can pay all these people coming over from Zimbabwe so much less. I remember it's somewhere like—how many rand?

**Lexy:** 50 to 400.

**Joel:** Yeah, so it's eight times as—he gets to pay them an eighth of what he used to be paying the locals. And so you could see how that's hurting the people around them. And so I think it's interesting how

Deo sees, "Oh, well these people are completely screwed over because *I'm* getting something."

Joel's comment helped Nick to make his own connection between this scene and current immigration issues in the US:

**Nick:** It's the same thing that's going on in the Southwest right now [. . .] with people crossing the border and [serving as] cheap labor.

**Joel:** And so, as a result of that, there are a lot of people who can't get even low class labor jobs because those have been . . .

**Nick:** There's always going to be someone who's going to work . . .

**Joel:** For cheaper because they don't have to report them and stuff.

Joel and Nick took turns completing their narrative about immigration in the US in response to this event in the book. Lexy responded in kind and brought the conversation back to the issue of racism when she stated that where she is from, "People *hate* Hispanic people." However, she added, "It's not on this level. It's not violent." Here, Lexy refers to the scene later in the novel that is based on the 2008 riots in South Africa when tensions about refugees escalated to uprisings in which several were injured and one man was burned to death (Underhill & Khumalo, 2010). This part of the conversation concluded with participants acknowledging that immigration issues in the US also involve varied forms of violence and continued on to other topics such as the scale of violence around immigration in the US, the background on hyperinflation and the devaluation of Zimbabwe currency, and approaches to using this novel with high school students.

While they did not necessarily come to a consensus through this discussion, participants collectively acknowledged that racism and xenophobia are both forms of prejudice that stem from or are exacerbated by an economics system where the disadvantaged are exploited and pitted against each other. The group setting also contributed to a complex discussion as each participant built on the previous comment and added

a new element to the conversation, drawing from the novel, films, and their broader knowledge of social issues, resulting in a collective learning environment. This example illustrates the ways in which participants engaged with this postcolonial young adult novel and a variety of discourses in the space of the book club to articulate, revise, and complicate their understanding of these issues across literary, personal, national, and global contexts.

## Implications and Conclusion

There is no single or simple method for preservice teachers to cultivate a complex understanding of social and systemic inequities in education. This chal-

lenge is exacerbated when preservice teachers are from privileged groups and have little experience with cultural and linguistic diversity (Castro, 2010; Philion & He, 2004). Postcolonial young adult literature marks a good starting place for preservice teachers to learn about and build upon experiences with diverse cultures in various socio-

historical contexts that may not be available to them otherwise (Tarc, 2009; Philion & He, 2004). Although the characters are fictional, postcolonial literature tends to draw on actual events, which invites readers to engage these narratives as both fictional and plausible. While classics also function in this way, postcolonial literature offers a glimpse into cultures that are not typically represented in the US secondary school curriculum. Lauren drew a similar conclusion in her follow-up questionnaire:

[T]here is a plethora of [postcolonial] texts available that teach the same themes and lessons as traditional canonical texts that can bring something else to the educational table. These texts have themes and messages that are central to any piece of literature one would want to teach in a classroom, but they also expand readers' understanding of the world around them and of different cultures that they would not otherwise have a way of experiencing.

Postcolonial stories prompt readers to reflect on established national narratives in more critical ways, as well as expand readers' knowledge of cultures

outside their own. Educators should therefore carefully select novels that resist dominant narratives of cultures around the world. Using such texts in teacher preparation courses might help preservice teachers envision teaching from global perspectives. For instance, Lauren referred to a Modern Criticism course she had taken and explained that, "Through this book club, I realized I could take that concept and apply it to a secondary education classroom." Thus, teacher educators might infuse the methods and young adult literature courses they teach with postcolonial texts.

It is, however, not sufficient to rely on postcolonial narratives for provoking these critical insights. Readers—preservice teachers especially—must do more than simply read such narratives and engage with the culture represented. As Freeman and Lehman (2001) posit, teachers also need to be able to evaluate these texts to consider issues of representation in the narratives and whether or not they, as readers, are engaging in "ethnocentric universalism" (Crocco, 2005) when they identify with certain themes in the stories over others. Teacher educators who use postcolonial young adult literature in their courses should consider pairing the novels with critical or theoretical essays, as well as explicitly discussing strategies for reading across cultures to mirror the language in the subsequent paragraph (Mangat & Johnston, 2000; Thier, 2013).

The research findings I discuss in this article have inspired several shifts in my own teaching. In addition to including postcolonial texts in my courses, I now also implement book clubs to encourage students to use stories as heuristics to make sense of their own lives in a social setting (Kooy, 2006). In my methods course, I discuss strategies for reading across cultures. Specifically, I draw on Mangat and Johnston's (2000) research with high school students—they developed prompts asking students to examine the language in an excerpt from an African young adult text to determine whether the author and intended audience were insiders or outsiders to the culture represented. I use similar prompts to encourage preservice teachers to consider how authors use language as a cultural mediator for readers who are positioned as cultural outsiders. Another approach I use for reading across cultures draws from Thier's (2013) "cultural awareness logs," a strategy he developed to help his high school students engage with international texts. Over

the course of reading a novel, students keep logs in which they make inferences about the culture represented and use quotes from the book as textual evidence. I have implemented Thier's (2013) approach in my courses to highlight reading strategies teachers can use to support students' engagement with multicultural and international perspectives in literature.

Finally, the participants' discussion on racism and xenophobia described in this article suggests that developing a critical and expansive worldview is a process; through reading and discussing a postcolonial text in the social and relational space of a book club, readers' understanding of these issues can deepen and become more complex. However, readers might not come to a consensus or revise their prior understanding immediately; rather, as their understanding becomes more complex, they will have more literary and cultural experiences on which to draw in their future conversations about global perspectives (Mosley, 2010). Together with a rigorous curriculum and critical texts that challenge dominant views, reading postcolonial literature in the social setting of book clubs holds promise for preservice teachers to expand their knowledge and explore new horizons in a global context.

### Author's Note

This research was supported in part by the Research Foundation of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) program, Cultivating New Voices among Scholars of Color (CNV). Special thanks to Jacqueline Bach, Mel Bertrand, Cueponcaxochitl Sandoval, and Nicole Blalock for providing essential feedback on earlier drafts of this manuscript.

*E. Sybil Durand* is an assistant professor in the department of English at Arizona State University where she teaches courses in young adult literature and methods of teaching English. Her scholarship is grounded in postcolonial and curriculum theories, which situate literature and education at the intersections of sociocultural, historical, political, and national contexts. Her research focuses on young adult literature in general and postcolonial young adult literature in particular.

### References

Asher, N. (2005). At the interstices: Engaging postcolonial and feminist perspectives for a multicultural education pedagogy in the south. *Teachers College Record*, 107, 1079–1106.

- Beach, R., & Yussen, S. (2011). Practices of productive adult book clubs. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 55(2), 121–131.
- Bean, T. W. (2004). The role of multicultural literature as a counter-force to the literary canon. In A. Hickling-Hudson, J. Matthews, & A. Woods (Eds.), *Disrupting preconceptions: Postcolonialism and education* (pp. 57–75). Flaxton, Queensland, Australia: Post Pressed.
- Bochner, A. P. (2005). Interpretive and narrative. In J. L. Paul (Ed.), *Introduction to the philosophies of research and criticism in education and the social sciences* (pp. 65–67). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Bradford, C., Mallan, K., Stephens, J., & McCallum, R. (2008). *New world orders in contemporary children's literature: Utopian transformations*. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Cart, M. (2010). A new literature for a new millennium? The first decade of the Printz awards. *Young Adult Library Services*, 8(3), 28–31.
- Castro, A. J. (2010). Themes in the research on preservice teachers' views of cultural diversity: Implications for researching millennial preservice teachers. *Educational Researcher*, 39, 198–210.
- Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (2006). Narrative inquiry. In J. Green, G. Camilli, & P. Elmore (Eds.), *Handbook of complementary methods in education research* (pp. 375–385). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Crocco, M. S. (2005). Teaching *Shabanu*: The challenges of using world literature in the US social studies classroom. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 37, 561–582.
- Dimitriadis, G., & McCarthy, C. (2001). *Reading and teaching the postcolonial: From Baldwin to Basquiat and beyond*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Durand, E. S. (2012). *Examining the curricular and pedagogical challenges and possibilities of post-colonial young adult literature: A narrative inquiry of book clubs with preservice teachers* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from Louisiana State University Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Collection (URN 04262012-195539).
- Freeman, E., & Lehman, B. (2001). *Global perspectives in children's literature*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Goldblatt, P. F. (1998). Experience and acceptance of postcolonial literature in the high school English class. *English Journal*, 88(2), 71–77.
- Hickling-Hudson, A., Matthews, J., & Woods, A. (Eds.). (2004). *Disrupting preconceptions: Postcolonialism and education*. Flaxton, Queensland, Australia: Post Pressed.
- Johnston, I. (2003). *Re-mapping literary worlds: Postcolonial pedagogy in practice*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Kooy, M. (2006). The telling stories of novice teachers: Constructing teacher knowledge in book clubs. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 22, 661–674.
- Koss, M. D., & Teale, W. H. (2009). What's happening in young adult literature? Trends in books for young adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 52, 563–572.
- Lucas, K. (1990). Navajo students and "postcolonial" literature. *English Journal*, 79(8), 54–58.

- Mangat, J., & Johnston, I. (2000). Reading culture "behind a glass jar": Adolescent readers responding to African fiction. *The English Quarterly*, 32(3/4), 27–32.
- Maykut, P., & Morehouse, R. (1994). *Beginning qualitative research: A philosophic and practical guide*. Philadelphia, PA: The Falmer Press.
- Mosley, M. (2010). "That really hit me hard": Moving beyond passive anti-racism to engage with critical race literacy pedagogy. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 13, 449–471.
- Phillion, J., & He, M. F. (2004). Using life-based literary narratives in multicultural teacher education. *Multicultural Perspectives*, 6(3), 3–9.
- Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Saldanha, L. (2000). Bedtime stories: Canadian multiculturalism and children's literature. In R. McGillis (Ed.), *Voices of the other: Children's literature and the postcolonial context* (pp. 165–176). New York, NY: Garland Publishing.
- Tarc, A. M. (2009). Postcolonial studies as re-education: Learning from J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. In R. S. Coloma (Ed.), *Postcolonial challenges in education* (pp. 195–213). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Thier, M. (2013). Cultural awareness logs: A method for increasing international-mindedness among high school and middle school students. *English Journal*, 102(6), 46–53.
- Underhill, G., & Khumalo, S. (2010, July 30). No justice for burning man. *Mail & Guardian Online*. Retrieved from <http://www.mg.co.za/article/2010-07-30-no-justice-for-burning-man>.
- Williams, M. (2011). *Now is the time for running*. London, UK: Little, Brown.
- Willinsky, J. (2006). High school postcolonial: As the students ran ahead with the theory. In Y. Kanu (Ed.), *Curriculum as cultural practice: Postcolonial imaginations* (pp. 95–115). Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press.

## “I loved this book, even though . . .”:

Reading International Young Adult Literature

**F**or as long as I can remember, I have been interested in places, people, and cultures other than my own. As a young reader with working class parents who only traveled across one state line to visit grandparents, books provided my never-ending travels. Reading was a *serious* pleasure that let me “escape from myself into someone else’s world. To find myself in someone else’s words. To exercise my critical capacities” (Lesser, 2014, p. 3). It gave me “a sense of connection to life” (p. 6) across time, types of people, situations, cultures, and places.

Machado (2011) tells us that, ideally, we could all go abroad, get to know different people and landscapes, listen to other languages as a way to get “in touch with the beautiful diversity of cultures” (p. 397). Since the ideal remains a rarity, literary travel can take readers beyond their day-to-day existence, let them imagine life as different selves, and maybe give “shape and sense to some deep, blurred and unexpressed perceptions that begged to come to the surface” (p. 398). Literature expands readers’ “life spaces through inquiries that take them outside the boundaries of their lives” (Short, 2012, p. 12), exposing them to alternative ways to think about the world. Reading the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987) challenges internalized habits of thinking about practices and beliefs, attitudes and assumptions, and creates inroads to empathy, understanding, and respect for diversity.

By the fall of 2011, having read and collected about 70 young adult books set in countries other than the US, I decided to add some of these titles to my

young adult literature course primarily for prospective teachers. I was curious to find how my students might respond to the unfamiliar settings, cultural practices, and daily lives of the characters. I especially wanted to find out how they would think about teaching these books to their future students.

### **Classification: Multicultural, International, or Global Literature?**

Even after decades of using the term *multicultural* to specifically identify young adult literature about diverse cultures and ethnicities, scholars continue to hold varying views on what to include under the multicultural umbrella. Campbell (Cole, 2009) notes that a “multicultural awareness” began to develop in the seventies, making African American presence more visible in the “all-white mostly middle-class world” (p. 67) of young adult fiction. As more books about underrepresented people of color became available, the term *multicultural literature* came into being. Although stories about people around the world are included on many lists of multicultural literature, most are set in the United States (Louie, 2005).

Willis (1997) defines multicultural literature as literature that focuses on people of color, religious minorities, regional cultures, the disabled, and the aged, noting that such a broad definition encompasses race, gender, and class. For Hadaway (2007), the term refers to literature published in the US that “portrays diverse American cultures” (p. 4). Some (Louie, 2005; Lesesne, 2007) make no distinction between

settings in the US and countries outside of the US when discussing books about diverse cultures. Others (Bean, Dunkerly-Bean, & Harper, 2014; Bishop, 2007; Lehman, Freeman & Scharer, 2010) use alternative terms and identifying differences.

Bean, Dunkerly-Bean, and Harper (2014) argue that “in the past” (p. 241), local, national, and international young adult literature about cultural difference and diversity was called *multicultural*. They prefer “the more inclusive term *global* literature. Like multicultural literature, this category includes minority, indigenous, and other literature that highlights local or national culture” (p. 241), but unlike multicultural literature, it also includes “historical and contemporary works from the international community” (p. 241). The term *global* also “avoids isolating national from international” (p. 242), an isolation that tends to give students a Western vs. non-Western or “other” stance rather than seeing the world in all of us.

Bishop (2007) suggests using *multicultural* as an umbrella terms that includes at least three sub-groupings: world literature from non-Western countries, cross-cultural literature about relations between cultural groups, and books by authors writing about a cultural group other than their own. In 2000, Freeman and Lehman defined *international children’s literature*

according to where books were written and published in addition to the author’s native, immigrant, or citizenry status. By 2010, Lehman, Freeman, and Scharer simplified that definition as books that focus on international topics or are authored or published outside of the US. They recognize a close connection with multicultural literature but distinguish international literature from “books that portray parallel cultures *within* the United States” (p. 17).

Since definitive definitions and terms remain under discussion, I chose to name this literature *international* young adult literature (IYAL) in my course. I am not opposed to the *global* notion of inclusion, but I believe YA multicultural literature merits a separate emphasis for my students; there are so many books that show the rich diversity within the US and allow issues of social justice to remain a focus.

## Why Read International Young Adult Literature (IYAL)?

Reading and class discussion about multicultural literature often center on democracy and the protection of certain rights and freedoms. I wanted to draw attention to the recent growth in the number of young adult books for upper middle grade and high school readers set in countries other than the United States that often have different systems of government and practices concerning human rights. I also wanted to focus attention on the diversity of cultures and people beyond US borders about which many students (and teachers) openly claim to know little or nothing. I believe, with others, that such literature “is not a priority nor is it a well-known area of study for many teachers” (Bean et al., 2014, p. 248) but is “a way of knowing the world” (Short, 2012, p. 11). Hadaway (2007) states that “the events of September 11, 2001, underscored the need for the country to re-see our nation’s place in a larger world” (p. 3). Making international literature separate from multicultural literature seems to emphasize these messages. Table 1 lists additional differences I find that distinguish multicultural literature from international literature.

The goals for reading international literature remain the same as those for reading multicultural literature: understanding the Other, finding points of connection, diffusing prejudices or ignorance, expanding horizons, and practicing social justice

**Table 1.** Common differences between US multicultural literature and international young adult literature

US Young Adult Multicultural Literature	International Young Adult Literature
1. Schooling available and expected for all; required/protected by law	1. Schooling often unavailable, forbidden, or achieved at great sacrifice
2. Emphasis on relationships	2. Emphasis on relationships but conditions or political climate often disrupt them
3. Geographical setting familiar enough	3. Unfamiliar geographical setting
4. Familiar clothing and foods	4. Unfamiliar clothing and foods
5. Familiar language	5. New language; new vocabulary
6. Possible economic poverty	6. Frequent economic poverty, sometimes extreme
7. No homeland war (unless gang-related)	7. Homeland war conditions or political unrest
8. Religion may be present, rarely dominant	8. Less familiar religious practices more visible



(Banks, 2009; Bean et al., 2014; Nieto, 2009; Nieto & Bode, 2012; Sleeter & McClaren, 1995). Short (2012) reminds us that readers, by immersing themselves in story worlds, gain insights into how people feel, live, and think in a global culture and come to see themselves as connected through common humanity to young people around the world. I agree with Bean et al. (2014) that the term *international* does set up a Western vs. Other dichotomy. However, a temporary separation can isolate the literature for initial exposure and analysis and open a way to discuss with students the Western propensity to think of “us and them,” thus working to a teacher’s advantage.

### From “Experiment” to Study

In my 2011 fall semester Young Adult Literature course of 24 predominantly secondary English education majors, I dedicated one week to IYAL—both fiction and nonfiction. After nine weeks of class, having discussed much of two core texts (Cole, 2009; Rosenblatt, 1995) and having read 10 young adult books (such as Crutcher’s *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* [2003], Anderson’s *Speak* [2011], Myers’s *Monster* [2004], and Lynch’s *Inexcusable* [2007]), I thought students had a fair sense of young adult literature and enough practice with assessing books for teen readers.

About two weeks before “International YA Literature Week,” I gave students a brief introduction about the expanding body of YA literature into the international realm and handed out the assignment (see Fig. 1) along with a bibliography of the books in my collection. I explained that the paper would let them reflect upon and assess a book individually; short presentations would give everyone previews of all the books and provide the class with a collaborative assessment process. I distributed the books around the room and let students peruse and choose.

When presentation time arrived, students struggled to condense their book’s essence and an assessment into a concise summary that fit the time limit (number of students divided by available class time). Finally a male presenter looked at me with a saddened face and asked in a sincere yet obviously disappointed tone, “But there is so much more to say! Can’t I have more time?” We laughed and made a democratic decision to allow a bit more time, continue the presentations for another day, and collapse an upcoming assignment.

With a strong success, I began this study, repeating the process in three subsequent courses: Middle Grade Literature, fall 2012; Young Adult Literature, spring 2013 and Middle Grade Literature, fall 2013. Comparable data with four different groups over a two-year period provided a larger data sample of first-time responses to reading IYAL. To collect comparable data, I did not attempt to improve anything, with one exception. The first group complained when a book had no glossary or map and displayed low tolerance for unfamiliar words describing clothing, scenery, and so on. I told subsequent classes to *expect* unfamiliar language—an experience similar to reading fantasy and science fiction.

The study had three research questions:

1. How do students respond and/or relate to reading and hearing about people, cultures, conflicts, and religions as found in IYAL?
2. Do responses indicate reader empathy, open-mindedness, and/or understanding?
3. How do students compare young adult literature set in the United States with international young adult literature in terms of teen reader interest?

---

### Address the following after reading your selected book:

1. What did you learn about another culture/country?
2. What similarities would let teen readers connect to characters, plot or events, and setting?
3. What differences might cause difficulty in understanding this text?
4. Discuss the vocabulary: contextualized? difficult? Is there a glossary provided?
5. What might be needed to facilitate the reading and/or understanding of this text?
6. Rate the interest level and appropriate reader age for this work and explain why.

### Presentations for International Young Adult Book

Prepare a \_\_\_-minute (determined by class size) talk to include:

- a brief plot description
- a look at character/characterization (assess development of)
- a discussion of how the book presents another culture (minimally? richly? reader feels like s/he has been there? outstanding? not so good?)
- an analysis of what might/might not interest a US teen reader
- speculation about what a US teen reader might learn
- examples of what you learned about another culture/country
- an assessment of new vocabulary—glossary provided? needed?

---

**Figure 1.** Prompts for a brief paper focused on international young adult books

## Data Collection and Analysis

Recognizing that the culture of a classroom shapes reader responses (Van Maanen, 1988), I drew primarily on written responses from students for this analysis. After the last course ended, I coded the assigned papers (as described in Fig. 1) from the 101 students across all four courses as one data set for emerging categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). With repeated coding, these categories clustered into dominant themes. Tallying the coded categories to find themes, 6 of a total of 14 clearly dominated: Similarities That Connect, Differences, Reading Interest, Ease of Reading, Empathy, and Broadened Perspectives. Because the theme Broadened Perspectives garnered the most student commentary, and because it represented major goals for reading international literature, I conducted a semantic relationship domain analysis (Spradley, 1979) to find a more specific breakdown of this key theme. Results clustered into four areas: 1) Increased Knowledge Base, 2) Raised Awareness/Consciousness, 3) Open-Mindedness, and 4) Understanding.

Although the assigned paper directly asked students to notice two of the dominant themes—Similarities that would help readers connect and Differences that might hinder understanding—I approached coding as if the papers were undirected responses for four reasons: 1) to recognize the presence of a strategy already practiced by my students in this course of identifying similarities and differences between protagonists and readers that could foster or deter connections and reader interest; 2) to remain open to response variations beyond students simply naming similarities or differences; 3) to see if my students were able to find similarities with a protagonist even when the culture, settings, and events in the story were unfamiliar; and 4) to see if my students interpreted similarities and differences as they had with books read earlier in the course or if the international context made similarities or differences less visible.

I found that Perry's (1998) research on college students' intellectual and ethical development provides a useful analytical tool to present how my students read, wrote, and discussed IYAL to facilitate an "unfolding view of the world" (p. xiii). Perry identified a recursive process with four main "positions" (p. 51); through engagement with this process, students attempt to make sense of incoming infor-

mation that conflicts with earlier assumptions and experiences. *Duality* represents a student's current view, with a right and wrong, us/them, or normal/alien authority in place. *Multiplicity* occurs when a plurality of viewpoints or differences meets duality and challenges earlier thinking, causing "a temporary fuzziness in Authority's domain" (p. 107). As students reject or assimilate new information, *relativism* allows for recognition of other ways of thinking, even though one's dualistic view may not change right away. Last, *commitment* refers to a realization of, reasons for, or a coming-to-terms with the new.

## Findings: Student Responses to IYAL

The following sections present the six themes, data examples from students' papers, and analysis through Perry's positions to provide evidence of how reading IYAL can initiate reflective thinking about unfamiliar worlds of diversity and nurture movement toward empathy, open-mindedness, and understanding.

*Theme #1: Similarities That Connect* initiate the necessary bond between reader and protagonist, a bond that grabs and sustains reader interest and begins to move a reader beyond facts to touch "emotions, feelings, personal identification, longing for closeness, mutual sympathy or compassion" (Machado, 2011, p. 398). Across texts, students identified innumerable similarities, including "a search for identity," "sibling rivalry," "romance," "family," and "struggling against some type of oppression."

*Theme #2: Differences* generally cause disruptions that a plot will work through to some resolution. The differences in IYAL, however, are integral to characters' lives, settings, and plot. A student who read *Keeping Corner* (Sheth, 2007), for example, listed similarities of "romance" and "dreams about the future" when considering young Leela in India. She at first imagines that Leela's arranged marriage will be happy, with opportunity for education to become a doctor, but then notes how her dreams morphed into "engaged at two, married at nine, and widowed by twelve." This shift implies the idea that, while all teens have dreams and hope for romance (Similarity), teens like Leela too often have dreams interrupted or destroyed due to cultural practices (Difference).

Although students named what they deemed to be differences, I began to notice that many of the named

differences seemed less a distinct difference and more a similarity that was different by degree, in the frequency of occurrence, the limitation of a behavior considered a human right in the US, or the extensiveness in denying the freedom to choose or to act. For instance, several students identified “learning to make grown-up decisions” as a Similarity That Connects, but under Differences they noted that while US teens have rights (cultural or legal) and some modicum of control, teens in IYAL too frequently had “no voice” or “no choice.” Many “don’t have the freedoms,” a lot of “girls can’t get an education,” others are “forced to be in a war and fight at age eleven,” and some are “hiding in fear of the government.” Yet, within any of the differences noted, the protagonists were still making grown-up decisions (Similarity).

For example, in *The Story of My Life* (Ahmedi, 2005), Farah’s life in Kabul changed when the Taliban took control, pushing her family to journey to Pakistan as refugees. A student reading this book claimed that finding similarities “was tough because Farah has been through so much in her short life, from losing a leg in a land mine to the death of [multiple family members] to war.” For this student, the differences of Farah’s situation appeared to crowd out any recognition of similarities across cultures and situations, such as emotions involved in coping or personal stamina and courage in the face of adversity. Using Perry’s (1998) theory, noting what Farah “has been through” does move this reader beyond duality-oriented thinking to find multiple viewpoints about Farah’s life (“tough”; “in her short life”; “war”) and suggests movement toward relativism in providing reasons (“war”) from which to think about Farah’s life as different from the reader’s own (“losing a leg in a land mine”; “death of” multiple family members).

In a way, the explicit direction in the assignment to identify differences imposed duality-oriented thinking. However, the inability of students to recognize grown-up decision making in IYAL story settings suggests evidence of Perry’s (1998) multiplicity fuzziness—a recursive grappling between the “us vs. them” mindset and new information as a plurality of viewpoints. Students’ awareness of any emotional and psychological similarities may have faded in response to the shock related to learning of a protagonist’s trauma from war or a particular cultural practice. Soter (1997) concurs, saying that a contemporary

work may have “a greater degree of directness, bluntness, perhaps even shock-effect” (p. 217).

*Theme #3: Reading Interest* was high for all but four of the 101 students, and several expressed surprise at how much they enjoyed these books despite their initial concerns that many IYAL book covers were not as appealing as familiar YA books and that they expected them to read “like a dry, social studies textbook.” A student reading *A Bottle in the Gaza Sea* (Zenatti, 2008), the story of a young girl witnessing a bombing in Tel Aviv and putting a letter of hope for peace in a bottle, states, “I didn’t

expect to relate to the book or even necessarily like it because I expected it to be opposite of what I’m used to, but it wasn’t, and I very much enjoyed my book.” A student who chose *I Am Nujood* (Ali, 2010) writes, “I dreaded this assignment because I didn’t think any of the options looked like my usual choice, but I was pleasantly surprised. It is unusual for me to find an assigned book that I can’t put down, but this one had my full attention.” A true story of a 10-year-old girl brave enough to resist and leave an abusive arranged marriage, to file for divorce in Yemen, and to gain international attention does surprise!

Only four students stated they “did not like” their book but learned from it. A student reading *Journey to Jo’burg* (Naidoo, 1986) claimed, “It lacked detail and strong characters” yet “did a great job of painting the environment and telling a good story with limited pages.” Another claimed that *A Stone in My Hand* (Clinton, 2002), about a young girl’s ability to cope with her father’s disappearance in Israel from Gaza City by taming and talking to birds on her rooftop, was “not a personal preference as I prefer action.” Later in the paper she wrote, “It made me realize how much Americans take for granted on a daily basis. I never knew much about the violence between Israel and Palestine. To be honest, I feel selfish after reading this book.” In later discussions, students said these books may be for younger readers.

A third “enjoyed” *Thunder over Kandahar* (McK-

---

**I began to notice that many of the named differences seemed less a distinct difference and more a similarity that was different by degree.**

---

ay, 2010), a story of two girls who are friends, whose school is destroyed by the Taliban, and who suffer serious injuries while traveling to escape, but the reader took issue with the author's depiction of US soldiers; the reader's husband was currently in the military.

---

**The combination of reading interest and ease of reading seemed to create the bridge that allowed readers to gradually adjust to the unfamiliar, to push past duality into recognizing the multiplicity.**

---

Any of these comments could provide examples of readers in Perry's (1998) duality phase, as evidenced by their initial resistance to new information, but reading preferences and expectations seem to be consistent factors as well.

The fourth student first stated that his book, *The Echoes of the Lost Boys of Sudan* (Disco & Clark, 2011), "was pretty monotonous, somebody shooting at them or bombing them every other page." I was concerned that I had an unusually insensitive reader until I read a later paragraph in his paper. The bracketed terms show Perry's (1998) recursive process at work:

For starters, the Arab army wipes out a whole village because they want them out. Something you won't find in our society [duality]. They live in a village in Southern Sudan from 1989 to the present, so it is weird to think that people still live like this today [duality], in huts and making fires, struggling for food and water, all while fighting the harsh Southern Sudan elements [multiplicity]. All four boys were six when the first shootings occurred. Most of them were working. At the age of six and working [multiplicity moving toward relativism]!

Because the dualities are stated so definitively as "you won't find" and "weird" when comparing the reader's culture to that of the boys in Sudan, the subsequent listing of differences plus the repetition of age "six" show the reader moving from a "weird" duality to a realization that the culture and/or conditions have fuzzied-up his initial thinking, letting him recognize that a new way to think about it is needed. He seems on the edge of coming to terms with a boy's life at age six in Sudan as an alternative life created by facts stated in his first sentence rather than just "weird."

*Theme #4: Ease of Reading* appeared to be one of the students' greatest pleasures, even as it amazed

them given their assumptions that a book considered easy typically equates with boring. With the often unfamiliar context inherent in IYAL titles, students repeatedly claimed that readers could appreciate these books because the unfamiliar is made more accessible through an easy style of writing. As long as readers bonded with a protagonist, the plot needed enough action and just enough embedded historical or political context to hold interest but not overwhelm. The combination of reading interest and ease of reading seemed to create the bridge that allowed readers to gradually adjust to the unfamiliar, to push past duality into recognizing the multiplicity. One student who read *The Flame Tree* (Lewis, 2004), the story of Isaac, a US doctor's son and a Christian who is taken hostage by Islamic terrorists in Indonesia, attempted to explain the process (Perry's [1998] terms in brackets):

The book was easy, but readers must have an open mind to put aside their own beliefs and understand from another point of view [multiplicity]. It was difficult for me to understand someone else's culture and religious belief without my own interfering [duality], but I allowed myself to think that not everyone grows up in a society with the same belief system [multiplicity]. I put myself in their shoes [student's strategy to move toward relativism].

Another student who read *Thura's Diary* (al-Windawi, 2004) wrote, "Easy to read but difficult to understand fully what Thura and her family are going through [recursive duality and multiplicity]" on a daily basis as war begins in Iraq.

Many students claimed they would have given up reading a book with so much new information if the reading had been difficult. *Child of Dandelions* (Nanji, 2008) tells the story of two girls in Uganda who are friends, one whose people are hated by Idi Amin, the other a dancer planning to marry Idi Amin. In response, a student wrote, "I would not read a history text on this Idi President, but I would read this true account that happened through a fictional character." Since no one described what "easy to read" meant, I asked the class the following week. For them, easy means quick reading, short paragraphs and descriptions, but strong imagery, fairly easy vocabulary, enough dialogue, and brief insertions of history or background that allow a reader to follow the plot and absorb new information.

*Theme #5: Empathy* happens when a reader connects with, feels for, and temporarily "becomes" a

protagonist while reading. Empathy allows the mind to become more open to differences and increases the possibility for changing old notions of *what is* to a broader worldview. The reader of *Beneath My Mother's Feet* (Qamar, 2011) felt an intense empathy, even though her ability to consider alternative cultural values or a broader perspective remained unclear: "I wanted to climb inside the book and shake Leela's very traditional family members and tell them Leela is only a child and does not deserve to have a miserable life simply because her husband passed away."

With nearly all students writing statements like, "I felt myself crying with her" or "I was caught . . . to see how he feels, things that he sees, how he interacts," the evidence in this study suggests that IYAL offers strong opportunities to develop empathy. Yet, as Louie (2005) describes, several types of empathy occur for students when reading literature across cultures, ranging from cognitive ("to see how he feels") to reactive emotional ("shake Leela's" family) to cross-cultural recognition or respect.

*Theme #6: The four areas of the Broadened Perspectives theme* (see Table 2) demonstrate a reader's movement from exposure to new information to experiencing disruption in one's prior knowledge. Once the disrupting information settles a bit, a reader's judgment of "abnormal" or "inferior" can shift to "different." At this point, the mind is temporarily open to alternative ways of thinking.

A few students who wrote about their reading processes help to illustrate this grappling toward understanding. In the following two examples, the four Broadened Perspective areas and Perry's (1998) positions are identified in parenthesis. In the first book, *My Name Is Not Easy* (Edwardson, 2011), Inupiaq and his brothers are sent far from the Arctic Circle to a strict Catholic boarding school in Alaska where his language and nearly everything familiar is forbidden. A student writes:

I was so ignorant about the Eskimo culture that I am almost ashamed [raised awareness/multiplicity]. To have a rivalry between Eskimos and Indians [increased knowledge] never occurred to me [raised awareness/multiplicity]. I have learned about multiculturalism [increased knowledge] but have never personally experienced it [suggests understanding/relativism]. This book put me in the place of a multicultural student forced into a mainstream position [raised awareness/multiplicity]. It opened my eyes [raised

awareness; open-mindedness/multiplicity; commitment]. Books like this can help make me more open-minded [open-mindedness/relativism].

A different reader of *Beneath My Mother's Feet* (Qamar, 2011) tells us that

[I]n Pakistan, to be without a husband is shameful [increased knowledge/duality]; I equate it to being unemployed in our society [understanding/multiplicity; relativism]. When Abbu is banned from Seema's house, my American mind automatically thought they were headed for divorce [duality]. But when Abbu shows up, Amma immediately forgives him. I realized this just must show how it is in their culture [raised awareness to open-mindedness/multiplicity to relativism]. Even though Abbu's actions forced the family

**Table 2.** Domain analysis results of "broadened perspectives" theme

<b>Broadened Perspectives: Four Areas</b>	<b>Definition of Areas</b>	<b>Data as Evidence</b>
Increased Knowledge	New information learned	1. "I learned how Palestinian people react to Israeli soldiers and their rules and how the soldiers react to the Palestinians." 2. "Every day in Sudan kids have to fight to survive, dodging bullets and wild animals." 3. "Didn't know people in villages in Yemen didn't have cars."
Raised Awareness/ Consciousness	Showing a growing interest or concern; a desire to do what is right	1. "Seems to be more of a communal element in poverty-stricken countries." 2. "I gained insight into how innocent people, not just our troops, are being placed in dangerous situations." 3. "I was in shock that this horrible environment [sweat shop] is a harsh reality millions of children face." 4. "We are so insulated and inured to our culture."
Open-Mindedness	Willing to consider new ideas; unprejudiced	1. "I was enlightened about the Taliban. I usually see Arabs as terrorists, but now I know they suffer from terrorism in their everyday life."
Understanding	Sympathetic or empathetic awareness or tolerance	1. "It gave me poignant insight into how a young man could be convinced to kill himself for a cause."

out of their home to become house servants, Amma has no choice but to forgive him [open-mindedness/commitment]. Without him, she will be stuck as a house servant forever [understanding/commitment].

Responses across all 101 papers in the four areas of the Broadened Perspectives theme provide evidence that students were experiencing the learning goals desired when reading multicultural or international literature (Banks, 2009; Bean et al., 2014; Machado, 2011; Nieto, 2009; Short, 2012; Sleeter & McClaren, 1995). Many students named their prejudices or ignorance and noted their need to expand both knowledge and ways of thinking about cultures and countries around the world. Nearly all made an attempt to find points of connection in order to better understand “the Other.”

### Some Challenges with Teaching and Reading International Young Adult Literature

Teaching unfamiliar literature requires feeling comfortable as a co-learner rather than as the expert. Internet resources relieve basic background information concerns and vocabulary difficulties, and the use of online images has the potential to promote reader interest and make story settings easier to envision.

Researching and discussing both IYAL literature and the larger cultural issues it raises require time. For book selection, I prefer authors native to the country about which they write but accept others who integrate enough cultural, historical, or political detail. I prefer recent time frames over historical so that current events further enhance reader interest and story relevance.

For teen readers, venturing into new geographical and cultural territory with IYAL may result in resistance. To help students grapple successfully with the very concept of *culture*, teachers might draw upon Hofstede’s (1991) work in psychology. Reminding us that culture is learned, not inherited, he conceptualizes culture as mental programming or “software of the mind” (p. 4). Every person holds cultural patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting that are primarily acquired in childhood but learned throughout a lifetime. Beneath one’s learned culture lays a foundation of human nature, containing both universal and inherited qualities. A third layer, the individual personality, is both inherited and learned. Calling it a moral issue, Hofstede notes the importance of teaching that one’s cultural home is not *normal* but specific to one’s group. He believes having an understanding of one’s own culture to be a basic skill, a skill needed to understand the values of others and communicate

**Table 3.** Challenges with teaching and reading about unfamiliar cultures

For Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teaching comfort</li> <li>• Book selection</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bean et al. (2014) state some are not comfortable teaching about unfamiliar places, populations, or cultures. Rosenblatt (2005) challenges teachers to acquaint youth with literature about all people to eliminate provincialism and foster sound international understanding.</li> <li>• Consider amount of cultural and sociopolitical information included, time period, setting, intensity of description for age appropriateness.</li> </ul>
For Teen Readers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unfamiliar geographic and cultural territory</li> <li>• Conceptualizing <i>culture</i></li> <li>• Ethnocentric thinking</li> <li>• Experiencing “Insider” and “Outsider” values as a basic skill</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utilize Hofstede (1991) approach with students.</li> <li>• Use multiple definitions prior to reading. Excerpts from Geertz (1973) may suffice: a psychological structure that guides the behavior of individuals or groups (p. 11), a context, not a power (p. 14), and “a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols” (p. 89).</li> <li>• Define and discuss a definition: the dual judgment of one’s own culture as normal and other cultures as different or abnormal, thus inferior, which results in uncritically accepting one’s own culture while remaining biased or intolerant of other cultures (Schopmeyer &amp; Fisher, 1993).</li> <li>• Schopmeyer &amp; Fisher (1993) offer exercises of heightened sensitivity; stopping to question why certain practices may have been developed; looking from both sides.</li> </ul>

or cooperate with people in a global society. Thus, the reader's challenge: to read about unfamiliar cultures before making a concerted effort to examine one's own layered culture.

Soter (1997) notes that the reader's "starting point for engagement *and* interpretation will be different from that of cultural 'insiders'" (p. 215). For instance, a student reading *Climbing the Stairs* (Venkatraman, 2010) finds Vidya at 15 with a vibrant personality in a culture of patriarchy and arranged marriages, in a time of impending war, and in separate living areas from males in her grandfather's traditional household. A student writes, "There is no such thing as an independent woman here" and "no education option unless the man of the house decides it is appropriate." The tone suggests a "shock-effect" (Soter, p. 217) or "reactive emotional empathy" (Louie, 2005, p. 571)—two understandable responses as the reader begins to connect with Vidya's character and discovers major cultural practice differences.

Ethnocentric thinking among readers presents another challenge. The student finding Vidya without independence or with no options for education adds, "This made me compare Vidya's life to mine." The student's challenge here becomes consciously considering her own culture (Hofstede's basic skill) as well as considering cultural differences for Vidya without deeming Vidya inferior. Schopmeyer and Fisher (1993) suggest helping students develop an appreciation of their own and other cultures by becoming both insiders and outsiders through exercises of heightened sensitivity and by stopping to question and examine from both sides in order to disrupt thinking that "my culture is normal; others are not."

## Discussion and Closing Comments

The study aimed to explore how students respond and/or relate to reading and hearing about people, cultures, conflicts, and religions as found in IYAL; whether responses indicate reader empathy, open-mindedness, and/or understanding; and how students compare young adult literature set in the United States with international young adult literature in terms of teen reader interest. Relative to the first aim, I did discover how my students responded and related to IYAL. All were surprised to have learned so much about other countries, cultures, and sociopolitical is-

ues from easy-to-read young adult literature. All but a few expressed surprise or guilt for being so uninformed about countries and cultures outside of the US.

Nearly all students expressed that they now have a more open mind and attitude toward recognizing differences rather than a "normal/abnormal" duality. However, as Robertson and Martin (2000) note, "[R]ecognition does not necessarily constitute tolerance," and "tolerance does not necessarily imply understanding. Understanding does not guarantee acceptance" (p. 502). Changing attitudes may take years of outside influences, but repeated and varied approaches over time do make an impact (Gardner, 2006). IYAL appears to be one powerful influence.

Relative to the second research question, students did transition from early "us/them," shocked, or anger-related responses toward empathy and/or understanding.

Empathy with characters came easily, but understanding cultures and conditions different from their own presented greater challenges. The development of Hofstede's (1991) basic skill of understanding one's own culture to be able to understand or communicate with people of another culture remained weak but could be strengthened with specific assignments to foster this skill. Yet, students' early emotional reactions of not wanting to "get close to a world that ignored individuals' rights" (Louie, 2005, p. 575) seemed to soften, letting them "shorten the distances between characters and themselves" (p. 575) enough to experience a connection of common humanity around the world (Short, 2012). Reader empathy thus presents the opportunity to extend discussions about the significance of one's culture.

Regardless of a reader's age, portrayals on television, in movies, and over the Internet give us superficial understandings, often grounded in fear and stereotypes, about the people of countries other than the United States. These depictions can lead to "ethnocen-

---

**Yes, these titles explore issues more serious and more intense, but they also offer realities one cannot ignore if we are to be aware and educated about the world in which we live.**

---

trism, a lack of understanding about global cultures, and a stance of pity and superiority over the ‘poor and unfortunate’ in the world” (Short, 2012, p. 13). We all need to have our assumptions and perspectives challenged if we want to “gain insights into how people feel, live, and think in global cultures” (p. 13).

In response to research question three, students in this study agreed that IYAL presents “more serious issues” and “more intense poverty, racial injustice, and death”; that “[teen] concerns are overwhelmed and shaped by regional conflicts”; and that these storied lives can be “inspiring” as we “see what hardships a teenager can overcome.” A repeated student response, “I loved this book, even though . . . ,” reveals students’ enjoyment in entering another’s culture and life in another country even as they struggle with stark contrasts to their own lives in which privilege looms large.

Yes, these titles explore issues more serious and more intense, but they also offer realities one cannot ignore if we are to be aware and educated about the world in which we live. “It is absolutely critical and absolutely necessary” (Bean et al., 2014, p. 251) for today’s youth to understand themselves in relation to the world. I agree with my students who say, “We take so much of our daily lives for granted,” “International books are essential to the classroom,” “I wish I could have read international books when I was in middle school,” and “Stories like these need to be read, shared, studied, and remembered.”

**Patricia Hauschildt**, Professor Emeritus at Youngstown State University, taught courses in English Education, literature, and writing before retiring in January 2014. She specializes in English Education and young adult literature.

### International Young Adult Literature Bibliography

(Use of \* indicates the book is for a mature reader. The country of a book’s setting is in parentheses.)

#### Nonfiction

- Ahmedi, F., with Ansary, T. (2005). *The story of my life: An Afghan girl on the other side of the sky*. New York, NY: Simon Spotlight Entertainment. (Afghanistan)
- \*Akbar, S., & Burton, S. (2005). *Come back to Afghanistan: My journey from California to Kabul*. London, UK: Bloomsbury. (Afghanistan)
- Ali, N., with Minoui, D. (2010). *I am Nujood, age 10 and divorced* (D. Coverdale, Trans.). New York, NY: Three Rivers Press. (Yemen)

- al-Windawi, T. (2004). *Thura’s diary: My life in wartime Iraq* (R. Bray, Trans.). New York, NY: Puffin. (Iraq)
- Disco, J., & Clark, S. (2011). *The echoes of the lost boys of Sudan*. Dallas, TX: Brown. (Sudan)
- Ellis, D. (2012). *Kids of Kabul: Living bravely through a never-ending war*. Toronto, ONT: Groundwood Books. (Afghanistan)
- \*Hirata, A. (2005). *The rainbow troops: A novel*. New York, NY: Sarah Crichton Books. (Indonesia)
- \*Jal, E. (2009). *War child: A child soldier’s story*. New York, NY: St. Martin’s Griffin. (Sudan)
- Lekuton, J. L. (2003). *Facing the lion: Growing up Massai on the African Savanna*. Washington, DC: National Geographic. (Kenya)
- Marston, E. (2005). *Figs and fate: Stories about growing up in the Arab world today*. New York, NY: George Braziller. (Syria, Lebanon, a Palestinian refugee camp, Egypt, and Iraq)
- \*Mah, A. Y. (2010). *Chinese Cinderella*. Fort Walton Beach, FL: Ember. (China)
- McDonnell, F. J. H., & Akallo, G. (2007). *Girl soldier: A story of hope for northern Uganda’s children*. Washington, DC: Chosen. (Uganda)
- Walters, E., & Bradbury, A. (2012). *When elephants fight*. Vancouver, B.C.: Orca Book Publishers. (Kenya)
- Wrigley-Field, E. (Ed.). (2009). *IraqiGirl: Diary of a teenage girl in Iraq*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books. (Iraq)
- Yousafzai, M. (2013). *I am Malala*. New York, NY: Little, Brown. (Pakistan)
- Zenatti, V. (2007). *When I was a soldier*. London, UK: Bloomsbury. (Israel)

#### Fiction Based on a True Story

- Edwardson, D. D. (2011). *My name is not easy*. New York, NY: Amazon Children’s Publishing. (Arctic Circle, Alaska)
- \*Kass, P. M. (2004). *Real time: A novel*. Boston, MA: Graphia. (Israel)
- McCormick, P. (2012). *Never fall down*. New York, NY: Balzer & Bray. (Cambodia)
- \*Michaelson, B. (2005). *Tree girl*. New York, NY: Harper Teen. (Guatemala)
- Park, L. S. (2010). *A long walk to water*. New York, NY: Sandpiper. (Sudan)

#### Fiction

- Abelove, J. (1998). *Go and come back*. New York, NY: Puffin. (Peru)
- \*Bagdassarian, A. (2002). *Forgotten fire*. New York, NY: Laurel Leaf. (Turkey)
- Budhos, M. (2006). *Ask me no questions*. New York, NY: Simon Pulse. (Bangladesh)
- Cameron, A. (2005). *Colibrí*. New York, NY: Laurel Leaf. (Guatemala)
- Castañeda, O. (1992). *Among the volcanoes*. New York, NY: Yearling. (Guatemala)
- Chen, D. (2004). *Wandering warrior*. New York, NY: Laurel Leaf. (China)
- Clinton, C. (2002). *A stone in my hand*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press. (Palestine)



- D'Adamo, F. (2003). *Iqbal: A novel*. New York, NY: Aladdin. (Pakistan)
- Ellis, D. (2001). *The breadwinner*. Toronto, ONT: Groundwood Books. (Afghanistan)
- Ellis, D. (2003). *Parvanna's journey*. Toronto, ONT: Groundwood Books. (Afghanistan)
- Ellis, D. (2004). *Mud city*. Toronto, ONT: Groundwood Books. (Pakistan)
- \*Jolin, P. (2008). *In the name of God*. New York, NY: Square Fish. (Syria)
- Khan, R. (2010). *Wanting Mor*. Toronto, ONT: Groundwood Books. (Afghanistan)
- Laird, E., with Nimr, S. (2006). *A little piece of ground*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books. (Palestine)
- Levitin, S. (1987). *The return*. New York, NY: Fawcett. (Ethiopia)
- Lewis, R. (2004). *The flame tree*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster. (Indonesia)
- McCormick, P. (2008). *Sold*. New York, NY: Hyperion Book. (India)
- McKay, S. E. (2010). *Thunder over Kandahar*. Toronto, ONT: Annick Press. (Afghanistan)
- Mead, A. (2007). *Dawn and dusk*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. (Iran)
- \*Michaelis, A. (2006). *Tiger moon* (A. Bell, Trans.). New York, NY: Amulet Books. (India)
- Mulligan, A. (2010). *Trash*. New York, NY: Ember. (unnamed third world country)
- Naidoo, B. (1986). *Journey to Jo'Burg: A South African story*. New York, NY: Harper Trophy. (South Africa)
- Naidoo, B. (2000). *The other side of truth*. New York, NY: Harper Trophy. (Nigeria)
- Nanji, S. (2008). *Child of dandelions*. Toronto, ONT: Second Story Press. (Uganda)
- Nye, N. S. (1999). *Habibi*. New York, NY: Simon Pulse. (Palestine)
- Oron, J. (2010). *Cry of the giraffe*. Toronto, ONT: Annick Press. (Ethiopia)
- Park, L. S. (2012). *When my name was Keoko*. New York, NY: Sandpiper. (Korea)
- Patterson, V. O. (2013). *Operation oleander*. Boston, MA: Clarion Books. (US/Afghanistan)
- \*Perera, A. (2011). *Guantanamo boy*. Park Ridge, IL: Albert Whitman. (Pakistan/Cuba)
- Perera, A. (2012). *The glass collector*. Park Ridge, IL: Albert Whitman. (Egypt)
- Perkins, M. (2010). *Bamboo people*. Watertown, MA: Charlesbridge. (Burma)
- Placide, J. (2002). *Fresh girl*. New York, NY: Dell Laurel-Leaf. (Haiti)
- Plum-Ucci, C. (2010). *Streams of Babel*. Boston, MA: Graphia. (US/Pakistan)
- Powers, J. L. (2011). *This thing called the future*. El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos Press. (South Africa)
- Qamar, A. (2011). *Beneath my mother's feet*. New York, NY: Atheneum. (Pakistan)
- \*Rahimi, A. (2003). *Earth and ashes*. New York, NY: Vintage. (Afghanistan)
- \*Schami, R. (1992). *A hand full of stars* (R. Lessker, Trans.). New York, NY: Puffin. (Syria)
- Senzai, N. H. (2010). *Shooting Kabul*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers. (Afghanistan)
- Sheth, K. (2007). *Keeping corner*. New York, NY: Hyperion. (India)
- Sheth, K. (2010). *Boys without names*. New York, NY: Balzer + Bray. (India)
- Staples, S. F. (1989). *Shabanu: Daughter of the wind*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf. (Pakistan)
- Staples, S. F. (2008). *Under the persimmon tree*. New York, NY: Square Fish. (Afghanistan)
- Staples, S. F. (2008). *The house of djinn*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. (Pakistan)
- Stratton, A. (2004). *Chanda's secrets*. Toronto, ONT: Annick Press. (sub-Saharan Africa)
- Stratton, A. (2008). *Chanda's war*. New York, NY: HarperTeen. (sub-Saharan Africa)
- Venkatraman, P. (2010). *Climbing the stairs*. New York, NY: Speak. (India)
- Wingard, L. (2012). *The turn-around bird*. Gig Harbor, WA: Plicata Press. (Mali)
- \*Young, T. W. (2011). *The mullah's storm*. New York, NY: Penguin Berkley. (Afghanistan)
- Zenatti, V. (2008). *A bottle in the Gaza Sea*. London, UK: Bloomsbury. (Israel/Palestine)

## References

- Anderson, L. H. (2011). *Speak*. New York, NY: Square Fish.
- Banks, J. A. (2009). Diversity, group identity, and citizenship education in a global age. In J. A. Banks (Ed.), *The Routledge International Companion to Multicultural Education* (pp. 303–322). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Crutcher, C. (2003). *Staying fat for Sarah Byrnes*. New York, NY: Greenwillow Books.
- Bean, T. W., Dunkerly-Bean, J., & Harper, H. J. (2014). In *Teaching young adult literature: Developing students as world citizens* (pp. 241–252). Retrieved from [http://www.sagepub.com/upm-date/54139\\_Chapter\\_12.pdf](http://www.sagepub.com/upm-date/54139_Chapter_12.pdf).
- Bishop, R. S. (2007). *Free within ourselves: The development of African American children's literature*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Cole, P. B. (2009). *Young adult literature in the 21st century*. Boston, MA: McGraw Hill.
- Freeman, E. B., & Lehman, B. A. (2000). *Global perspectives in children's literature*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word and the world*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey Publishers.
- Gardner, H. (2006). *Changing minds: The art and science of changing our own and other people's minds*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Hawthorne, NY: Aldine.
- Hadaway, N. L. (2007). Introduction: Building bridges to understanding. In N. L. Hadaway & M. J. McKenna (Eds.), *Breaking*

- boundaries with global literature: Celebrating diversity in K–12 classrooms* (pp. 1–6). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Hofstede, G. (1991). *Cultures and organizations: Software of the mind*. London, UK: McGraw-Hill.
- Lehman, B. A., Freeman, E. B., & Scharer, P. L. (2010). *Reading globally, K–8: Connecting students to the world through literature*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Lesesne, T. S. (2007). Of times, teens, and books. In Beers, K., Probst, R. E., & Rief, L. (Eds.), *Adolescent literacy: Turning promise into practice* (pp. 61–77). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Lesser, W. (2014). *Why I read: The serious pleasure of books*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Louie, B. (2005). Development of empathetic responses with multicultural literature. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 48, 566–578.
- Lynch, C. (2007). *Inexcusable*. New York, NY: Atheneum Books for Young Readers.
- Machado, A. M. (2011). Where worlds meet. In S. A. Wolf, K. Coats, P. Enciso, & C. A. Jenkins (Eds.), *Handbook of research on children's and young adult literature* (pp. 397–400). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Myers, W. D. (2004). *Monster*. New York, NY: Amistad.
- Nieto, S. (2009). Multicultural education in the United States: Historical realities, ongoing challenges, and transformative possibilities. In J. A. Banks (Ed.), *The Routledge international companion to multicultural education* (pp. 303–322). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Nieto, S., & Bode, P. (2012). *Affirming diversity: The sociopolitical context of multicultural education*. Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Perry, W. G. (1998). *Forms of intellectual and ethical development in the college years*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Robertson, E., & Martin, B. K. (2000). Culture as catalyst and constraint: Toward a new perspective on difference. *College English*, 62, pp. 492–510.
- Rosenblatt, L. M. (1938/1995). *Literature as exploration* (5th ed.). New York, NY: Modern Language Association of America.
- Rosenblatt, L. M. (2005). *Making meaning with texts: Selected essays*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Schopmeyer, K. D., & Fisher, B. J. (1993). Insiders and outsiders: Exploring ethnocentrism and cultural relativity in sociology courses. *Teaching Sociology*, 21, 148–153.
- Short, K. G. (2012). Story as world making. *Language Arts*, 90, 9–17.
- Sleeter, C. E., & McLaren, P. L. (Eds.). (1995). *Multicultural education, critical pedagogy, and the politics of difference*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Soter, A. O. (1997). Reading literature of other cultures: Some issues in critical interpretation. In T. Rogers, & A. O. Soter (Eds.), *Reading across cultures: Teaching literature in a diverse society* (pp. 213–229). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Spradley, J. P. (1979). *The ethnographic interview*. New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers.
- Van Maanen, J. (1988) *Tales of the field: On writing ethnography*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Willis, A. I. (1997). Exploring multicultural literature as cultural production. In T. Rogers & A. O. Soter (Eds.), *Reading across cultures: Teaching literature in a diverse society* (pp. 135–160). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.



## BOOK IN REVIEW: A TEACHING GUIDE

Rénard B. **Harris** & S. d. **Collins**



# Seriously, Can We Talk Laugh about Race?

Voices from *Open Mic*

*This article is also available in an online format that allows direct access to all links included. We encourage you to access it on the ALAN website at <http://www.alan-ya.org/page/the-alan-review-columns>.*

**F**or this issue’s “Book in Review” column, close friends and colleagues S. d. Collins and Rénard Harris join forces to tackle the formidable subject of “race.” Two friends, one column, one writing voice, and one heck of a topic. Race has been the focus of countless hours of conversation over the course of our two decades of friendship. If we were to create a t-chart comparing the two of us, it would look something like the following:

Rénard	S. d.
Tall	Not nearly as tall
Thin	A bit fluffier
Dancing Ropes of Braids	Tangled Mess of Curls
Eyes the Color of Amber	Eyes Crossed
City Mouse	Country Mouse

As if those differences weren’t enough, we then have the issue of “race.” On surveys that ask about “race,” one of us checks the box to the right of “African American,” while the other one checks the box next to “White.” We are ebony & ivory; chocolate & vanilla; pepper & salt.

Without a doubt, we are very different. On the other hand, our similarities far outweigh all of our differences. In his compellingly empathetic book,

*Every Day* (2012), David Levithan writes, “No matter what our religion or gender or race or geographic background, we all have about 98 percent in common with each other. . . . For whatever reason, we like to focus on the 2 percent that’s different, and most of the conflict in the world comes from that” (p. 77).

Still, even between long-time friends, race matters.

Race matters because our race helps us determine who we are. It is from our race that we cull pieces, no matter if those pieces are minuscule or monstrous, of our individual identities. It is the color of our skin, the shape of our eyes, the texture of our hair, and the shape of our bodies that embody the flags we wave to represent us when we step into a room.

Although it is our right to define ourselves based on our race, when others outside of our race begin to define us based on how we look, problems arise. Even worse is when those of one race control the opportunities of those of another.

A major issue in our US public education system is that, although it advocates supporting diversity, the system’s values align primarily with those of the White, middle class. For many students of color from low-income homes who do not assimilate into the world defined by White, middle-class people, the consequences are extremely harsh; those students too often become dropouts, are expelled, or graduate with far less life preparedness than their White peers.

If the goal of our educational system is to prepare children to be part of society and possess the knowledge, skills, and attitude to navigate the globe, what can we do in the classroom to help our learners? Race matters in the classroom always and is essential when

the teacher's goal is to welcome every person into the learning community and treat each person equally, especially those of minority races from low-income homes who have been marginalized.

Issues such as the one above are packed with intensity and encased with passion, sometimes creat-

ing an explosion of ill will when they aren't discussed with the proper care. The paradox of race is this; race matters, but people of different races are not always able to discuss it.

For this reason, it is our honor to spotlight *Open Mic: Riffs on Life between Cultures in Ten Voices*, edited by Mitali

Perkins, in this issue dedicated to "Race Matters." Having grown up "between cultures," Mitali reminds us, "The best way to ease the situation [of conversations about race] is with humor" (p. ix).

Mitali, the mic is all yours!

---

**The paradox of race is this; race matters, but people of different races are not always able to discuss it.**

---

## A Bit of Background on Open Mic

### About the Book

*Open Mic* is an anthology of ten pieces written by ten authors of differing backgrounds. However, all the authors share a couple of things in common: 1) they've spent most of their lives living in the margins of race and between cultures; and 2) they are able to write about their lives between cultures with infectious humor.

Some of the pieces are more memoirs, while some are more fictional; two of the pieces are written in free verse, and one is in the form of a comic. All of the offerings, regardless of their style or genre, are tightly crafted so that not one word is wasted on the reader. This also makes for a slim anthology—a total of 127 pages—which might help teachers sell the book to developing readers.

Each contribution offers what editor Mitali Perkins refers to as a "mirror" and/or a "window." Some will read *Open Mic* and see a reflection of themselves, be it the Indian American experience, the Korean American experience, the Latin American experience, the African American experience, and so on. For

others, reading *Open Mic* will be more like peering through a window into the specifics of someone else's life, a view that has the potential to demonstrate how similar we are to someone we thought to be so different.

### About the Author

Mitali Perkins, whose first name means "friendly," is a citizen of the world. Born in Kolkata, India, Mitali moved to New York City when she was seven years old. As a teenager, her family moved across the United States to suburban California. She has also crossed borders into Mexico, Africa, and the United Kingdom. Crossing borders: that's what Mitali Perkins does best.

Mitali learned early in her life that one of the most powerful ways to open people's hearts and minds is through stories (2013, April 10). While in New York, Mitali took her library books to the fire escape where, surrounded by blue skies and red railings, she would sit, snack on SweetTarts, and read and read and read. As an adult, Mitali created a virtual version of her peaceful place in the form of a blog titled "Mitali's Fire Escape: A Safe Place to Think, Chat, and Read about Life between Cultures."

Cultural identity is a strong thread that Mitali weaves throughout most of her work. Her novels include stories about Indian American young women (*Monsoon Summer*, 2004; *The Not-So-Star-Spangled Life of Sunita Sen*, 2005), a Bangladeshi girl disguised as a boy (*Rickshaw Girl*, 2007), and Burmese boy soldiers (*Bamboo People*, 2010). Mitali's next novel, *Tiger Boy*, is coming in April 2015.

## Using the Book in the Classroom

### Prereading Activities

Before becoming involved in discussions regarding race, it is helpful to understand our unconscious psychological dispositions toward people who are different from us. It is our thoughts, conscious or unconscious, that determine how we treat others.

### WHAT ARE YOU THINKING WITHOUT KNOWING YOU'RE THINKING IT?

Professors Anthony Greenwald (University of Washington), Mahzarin Banaji (Harvard University), and Brian Nosek (University of Virginia) designed the "Implicit Association Test" (IAT) to probe unconscious

biases. The results of more than one million IAT tests suggest that most people have unconscious biases. For example, nearly two out of three White Americans show a moderate or strong bias toward, or preference for, Whites, as do nearly half of all Black Americans. To find more about your unconscious biases, follow this link: <http://www.understandingprejudice.org/iat/>.

#### RACE—The Power of an Illusion

California Newsreel produced a three-part documentary about race in society, science, and history. Series executive producer and co-director Larry Adelman (2003) explains, “What we discovered is that most of our common assumptions about race—for instance, that the world’s people can be divided biologically along racial lines—are wrong. Yet the consequences of racism are very real.” Learn more about the validity of your beliefs about the human species and race by engaging in California Newsreel’s interactive tutorials: “What Is Race?,” “Sorting People,” “Race Timeline,” “Human Diversity,” and “Where Race Lives” ([http://www.pbs.org/race/000\\_General/000\\_00-Home.htm](http://www.pbs.org/race/000_General/000_00-Home.htm)).

#### Interdisciplinary Connections

*Open Mic* contains various undercurrents of social, political, and cultural issues. The resources listed below allow for teachers and learners to explore topics more deeply and to delve into other content areas.

##### Immigration

“Immigration Challenges for New Americans,” Library of Congress  
<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/primarysourcesets/immigration/>

“Mexican American Migrations and Communities,” Library of Congress  
<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/primarysourcesets/mexican-americans/>

“U.S. Immigration Policy: What Should We Do?” The Choices Program  
[http://www.choices.edu/resources/twtn\\_immigration.php](http://www.choices.edu/resources/twtn_immigration.php)

##### Race Relations

“Digital Archive of Primary Source Documents from the Life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.,” The King Center (The Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change)  
<http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive>

“Poll: 61 Percent of African-Americans Say US Race Relations Getting Worse,” CBS DC  
<http://washington.cbslocal.com/2014/02/04/poll-61-percent-of-african-americans-say-us-race-relations-getting-worse/>

“11 Facts about Discrimination against Latinos,” Do Something: Young People + Social Change  
<https://www.dosomething.org/tipsandtools/11-facts-about-discrimination-against-latinos>

##### Social Justice

Social Justice Solutions (A social worker-conceived and operated organization committed to creating a socially just world)  
<http://www.socialjusticesolutions.org/>

Think Progress (Editorially independent, nonpartisan, progressive, and committed to accuracy)  
<http://thinkprogress.org/>

#### Group Discussion Questions

The page references in the following discussion questions refer to *Open Mic: Riffs on Life between Cultures in Ten Voices*.

1. “Becoming Henry Lee” by David Yoo  
Toward the end of the story exists a scene where Henry and his Korean parents watch a movie in which two White actors play foes. Yoo writes, “As they watched the crime drama together, Henry was stunned to discover that his parents had mistaken the two actors for the same person” (p. 11). What is the significance of this scene? What might Yoo be communicating about racism?
2. “Why I Won’t Be Watching *The Last Airbender* Movie” by Gene Luen Yang  
Study carefully Gene Luen Yang’s art in his comic contribution to *Open Mic*. How does Yang distinguish between Asian Americans and European Americans? What traditional racist stereotypes are

absent from his art? How does Yang’s art connect to his final words of the comic, “If something bugs you about the world, say something. Do it respectfully and give good reasons.” (p. 19)?

3. “Talent Show” by Cherry Cheva  
Cherry Cheva’s full last name is Chevapravatdumrong, which is ethnically Thai. On the other hand, Cheva was born in Columbus, Ohio, grew up in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and is fully American. In “Talent Show,” Cheva writes from the perspective of an adolescent Jewish male whose love interest is an Asian female with a passion for comedy. What is Cheva’s message in “Talent Show,” and what details does she use to express this throughout her story?

4. “*Voilà!*” by Debbie Rigaud  
The question below comes from Michele Gorman’s excellent *Open Mic* teacher’s guide that she created for Candlewick Press. (See “Additional Resources” at the end of the column for a link to Gorman’s teaching guide.)

What people say and what others hear don’t always match—even when they’re speaking the same language. How can our expectations, assumptions, and body language influence our ability to make connections with others?

5. “Three-Pointer” by Mitali Perkins  
Perkins explains in the “About the Contributors” section of *Open Mic* that she and her sisters have names that give insight into their characters. “*Sonali* means ‘gold,’ *Rupali* means ‘silver,’ and *Mitali* means ‘friendly’” (Perkins, 2013a, p. 124). Furthermore, one of Perkins’s multifarious strengths as a writer is her ability to describe. Identify passages where Perkins describes people. Why are her comparisons effective? What are the similarities and/or differences in how other authors in the analogy describe people?

6. “Like Me” by Varian Johnson  
Although Principal Greer insists that all of the students who attend Hobbs Academy, a boarding school in Vermont, are “cut from the same cloth” (p. 55), Griffin, Violet, and Jasmine certainly contribute to the school’s diversity. Still, all three assimilated happily and seamlessly into the majority culture until Griffin heard Violet speak without any teachers or any other White students around. Griffin says:

It’s almost magical, the way she switches talking like that. Some people call it slang. Teachers call it bad English. Idiots call it Ebonics. And me—I call it just talking. Like the way you do with family. (p. 65)

Describe the nature of Violet’s home language. How does this connect with your own experience of the versatile nature of the way we speak? What insights do we gain into Griffin and Violet’s characters based on this scene?

7. “Confessions of a Black Geek” by Olugbemisola Rhuday-Perkovich  
Read the poem below (Harris, 2002) and respond to the following prompts/questions:

#### **Marginalized**

I don’t like being in the margin:  
It is like the corner of a room.  
I’m caged,  
My freedom is fenced with barbed wire.  
I wake up with ideas  
But go to sleep with rejections.  
I shout out dreams  
And I am hushed by reality,  
A reality that controls my choices,  
Choices measured by someone else’s vision.  
What they cannot see  
Cannot be my choice.  
I choose to have a voice,  
I choose to be heard!  
But I am in the margin.  
No one listens.

—Rénard B. Harris

Cite at least three examples from “Confessions of a Black Geek” that mirror the experience of being marginalized. Compare how “Confessions of a Black Geek” and “Marginalized” are resolved. What actions of the characters account for the different endings?

8. “Under Berlin” by G. Neri  
What are at least three specific details/lines of dialogue that cue the reader that Daddy is engaging the family and two unsuspecting German women in a game when he sits between the women on a crowded subway? Although he accomplished his objective of influencing the women to move, was there a cost associated with his “win”? What line completely summarizes the theme of Neri’s story?

9. “Brotherly Love” by Francisco X. Stork  
How does the title “Brotherly Love” signify the action of Stork’s story? How does the author use each of his characters to demonstrate how our *perception* of reality is not always accurate? Identify the climax of the story on page 112; what is the point that Stork so eruditely makes without explicitly revealing the actual circumstance of the situation? Which lines from the text support your claims?
10. “Lexicon” by Naomi Shihab Nye  
Nye masterfully and magically weaves carefully selected words and vivid images to create a tender portrait of her father. As suggested by her title, “Lexicon,” words matter—they matter to the speaker of the poem, the poet who constructed the poem, and to everyone else who depends on words to communicate with others. With *tone* being how Nye feels about her father and *mood* being the general feeling that “Lexicon” creates within the reader, what are the tone and mood of Nye’s piece? What words contribute to the tone and mood that Nye establishes? Which of the author’s words create a vivid picture in your mind?

### Post Reading Activities

#### A WORD WITH YOU, PLEASE . . . OR SIX

*Open Mic* ends with Naomi Shihab Nye’s “Lexicon.” By virtue of being a poet, Nye practices the discipline of choosing only the words that pack the most power—“The right words in the right order,” as Samuel Taylor Coleridge once described poetry. At different times in “Lexicon,” Nye describes her father with a mere six words: “He was Facebook before it existed” (p. 116), and “He loved the freshness of anything” (p. 120).

Literary legend has it that Ernest Hemingway once accepted the challenge of writing a short story in only six words, which he accomplished: “For sale: baby shoes, never worn.”

*Smith Magazine* (<http://www.smithteens.com>) invites teens to write and submit their own six-word memoirs. Taking cues from the memoirists in *Open Mic* and practicing the discipline of sparse language, write your own six-word memoir—or several. To see what some other teens have written, visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ejdNExso9M>.

#### LET’S TAKE A CLOSER LOOK

At the end of *Open Mic*, Mitali Perkins allows her readers a peek into the lives of each contributor to her anthology in “About the Contributors.” Select one of the authors and conduct a more in-depth author study. As with any good study, think of a question you would love to find out before you begin the study. For example, How did Cherry Cheva become a writer and producer for *Family Guy*? As a part of the research, try to include another story or poem by the same author as well as a critical essay that analyzes the author’s work. Don’t forget to let the readers of your research know where you found your information (cite your references), and make sure your reader can tell the difference between when you paraphrase your sources and when you quote them.

#### TODAY’S TEEN; TOMORROW’S ADULT

James Baldwin writes, “I am what time, circumstance, history, have made of me, certainly, but I am also much more than that” (1984, p. xii). Most of the characters in *Open Mic* are teenagers in the midst of developing into their future selves. It is the discomfort that they encounter that created their interesting stories (Perkins, private communication). With that in mind, choose one of the characters from the anthology and write a character sketch, story, or poem using the same character 10 or 15 years later as an adult. Certainly, use the information you gathered about the characters in *Open Mic*, but also ponder their future experiences. Don’t write shyly—be bold, take risks, and allow your characters to be whomever they are as older versions of themselves . . . be that version positive or negative, or more interestingly, both.

#### LOOK AT MY WORDS, NOT AT MY FACE—MY WRITING, NOT MY RACE

Mitali Perkins believes strongly in the positive potential of social media and how it can help developing writers (be those writers tweens, adolescents, or adults) find their voices (Perkins, private communication). One of the most powerful aspects of the online environment is that we don’t have to be defined by our looks, but only by our words. In order to develop your chops as a writer, consider contributing what you create to one or more of the websites listed below:

*Figment* is a community where you can share writing, connect with other readers, and discover new stories and authors (<http://figment.com/>).

*WritersCafe.org* is an online writing community where writers can post their work, get reviews, befriend other writers, and much more (<http://www.writerscafe.org/>).

*Young Writers Online* is a community of young writers, both new and experienced, dedicated to improving each other's writing (<http://www.youngwritersonline.net>).

*Writing World* provides more than 25 additional websites for young writers to submit their work for publication, share their writing with other writers, receive responses on their writing, and learn more about their craft from reading other writers' pieces (<http://www.writing-world.com/links/young.shtml>).

### **Additional Resources**

*A teacher's guide for Open Mic* by Michele Gorman and published by Candlewick Press:

<http://www.mitaliperkins.com/> (Located on the site below "Discuss My Books")

*Mitali's Fire Escape!: A Safe Place to Think, Chat, and Read about Life between Cultures*:

<http://www.mitaliperkins.com/>

**S.d. Collins** serves as an associate professor of Graduate Education Programs at Lincoln Memorial University. He returns to higher education after a two-year sabbatical of going back to a middle school classroom to teach English and talk books with adolescents, colleagues, and parents.

*S.d.'s writings have appeared in English Journal, Language Arts, The ALAN Review, and the Handbook of Research on Teaching Literacy. You are welcome to contact him at [sd\\_cllns@charter.net](mailto:sd_cllns@charter.net).*

**Rénard B. Harris** is an associate professor of Teacher Education at the College of Charleston in Charleston, SC. Holding an Ed.D. in the same field from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Rénard teaches social studies methods and middle grades application and supervises middle grade field students. He has explored various forms of storytelling, such as the blues as story, African American folktales, and blending personal narratives with social studies. In 2013–2014, he began a service program and research case study focusing on storytelling to enhance teaching and learning. *T.A.L.E.S. (Teaching And Learning with Engaging Stories)* is an alternative teaching program that uses storytelling to teach core content to disadvantaged students in low-performing schools. He will continue to investigate storytelling to enhance teaching and learning as a potential solution to the epidemic of disadvantaged students performing poorly in schools. Rénard invites you to contact him at [harrisr@cofc.edu](mailto:harrisr@cofc.edu).

### **References**

- Adelman, L. (2003, April). Statement from the executive producer on *RACE—The power of an illusion*. Retrieved from [http://www.pbs.org/race/000\\_About/002\\_04-about.htm](http://www.pbs.org/race/000_About/002_04-about.htm).
- Baldwin, J. (1984). *Notes of a native son* (Reissue edition with new preface). Boston, MA: Beacon Press. (Original work published 1955)
- Harris, R. B. (2002, December). Marginalized. *Academic Exchange Quarterly*. Greeley, CO: University of Northern Colorado. Retrieved from <http://www.unco.edu/ae-extra/2002/9/>.
- Levithan, D. (2012). *Every day*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Perkins, M. (Ed.). (2013). *Open mic: Riffs on life between cultures in ten voices*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press.
- Perkins, M. (2013, April 10). Asian American author series [Video file]. Retrieved from <http://resources.primarysource.org/content.php?pid=305994&sid=2507754>.





## RIGHT TO READ

Teri S. **Lesesne**, editor

Karin **Perry** and James Bucky **Carter**



# Asking Questions, Seeking Answers, Challenging Assumptions

*This article is also available in an online format that allows direct access to all links included. We encourage you to access it on the ALAN website at <http://www.alan-ya.org/page/the-alan-review-columns>.*

**A**s a member of ALAN, I am blessed with colleagues who are passionate about books, reading, young adults, and literacy and literature. I asked two of my ALAN colleagues to add their voices to this column. Karin Perry is the ALAN Membership Secretary. She is also a colleague of mine in the Department of Library Science at Sam Houston State University. Karin has personal experiences with fighting against censorship. Recently, she has been conducting research among teachers and librarians to determine how gatekeeping might affect purchasing decisions in the school library. She is joined in this issue by James Bucky Carter, another ALAN colleague. Bucky has served on the ALAN Board of Directors and chaired many ALAN committees. He is currently a member of the Anti-censorship Committee. Bucky's expertise includes comics and graphic novels, which comprise the focus for his contribution to the column. Thanks, Karin and Bucky, for your insights.

## Are You a Gatekeeper?

Karin Perry

Picture this. You're a school librarian who has just received your yearly book budget and is in the process of putting together your order. You've been reading review journals and using a vendor's online website

to help you choose your books. You've seen one title pop up over and over again in multiple journals and online from fellow librarians and book bloggers. All the sources say the same thing—the book is wonderful (it even has several starred reviews), but it has *a lot* of questionable language, talk of sex, and some underage drinking and smoking. You check the age-level recommendations and notice that the title is listed for readers in grades 9–12 and has a 16-year-old protagonist. You work in a high school. You wonder if people will complain about the language, sex, and smoking. You decide to leave the title off of your list just to be safe. You think, *if someone wants to read it badly enough, he/she can go get it from the public library*. You are guilty of self-censorship.

Self-censorship comes “in many seemingly innocuous forms like book labeling, parental control requirements, and restricted rooms and shelves” (Hill, 2010, p. 10). It is also embodied in the act of choosing not to purchase books based upon fear of controversial content or, in the worst case, because the content runs counter to the librarian's personal beliefs. While any type of censorship is a danger to readers' rights, self-censorship is especially hazardous. Self-censorship can be invisible.

Generally, school districts have selection policies to assist with book purchases and reconsideration policies to follow when materials are challenged. However, when self-censorship comes into play, these important policies tend to be ignored. Recently, I conducted a survey regarding the inclusion of controversial materials in library and/or classroom collections

(librarians: n = 299, teachers: n = 92). Findings reveal that 30% of teachers and librarians reported being unaware of the existence of these policies in their school

---

**Teachers and librarians second-guess themselves and remove books to avoid complaints from parents, students, administrators, or members of the community.**

---

districts. So in terms of warding off incidents of censorship, particularly self-censorship, a reasonable first step would be to educate teachers, librarians, and administrators as to the purpose and importance of having selection and reconsideration policies in place. Such documents provide guidelines for purchasing books and protection if someone lodges a complaint against

one in your collection; you can find samples on the ALAN SpeakLoudly resources page (<http://www.alan-ya.org/page/censorship-committee>).

Self-censorship stems from “fear that something might happen” (Hill, 2010). Teachers and librarians second-guess themselves and remove books to avoid complaints from parents, students, administrators, or members of the community. When asked if they ever had a parent complain about a book in their school or classroom library, 64% of the surveyed teachers and librarians responded yes; 22% of those actually removed the book because of the complaint. When asked whether or not they followed the procedure specified in the district’s reconsideration policy before they removed the book, 51% of respondents reported following policy, while 49% either stated they did not or did not answer the question. As a result, we know that 69 people out of the 140 who did answer removed the book from their collection without following the procedures of a policy. This may not seem like a lot, but 69 classrooms or libraries subsequently have one fewer book available for students.

We can even go a step further. What if the potentially challenged book is never purchased for the school or library in the first place? Avoiding the purchase of materials to avoid complaints is another form of self-censorship. After Barry Lyga’s *Boy Toy* (2007) was published in 2007, he anticipated trouble. *Boy Toy* is about a 12-year-old boy who engages in a

sexual relationship with his teacher. Lyga expected it “to spark letters to local papers, trigger complaints to the school board, and incite some parents to yank it from library shelves” (Whelan, 2009, p. 27). None of that happened. Why? Because bookstores placed *Boy Toy* in the adult section, if they carried it at all. Even more damaging, librarians weren’t recommending it or buying it “just in case someone complained” (Whelan, 2009, p. 27), even though the book received rave reviews from professional journals and major newspapers.

To see how common this issue is, the survey included a question about purchases. When asked if they avoided purchasing a book because of a potential complaint, 53% of respondents answered yes. Further, when asked if they remembered what they chose not to purchase, respondents listed both specific titles and general subjects they hadn’t and wouldn’t purchase for their libraries/classrooms. Attempts to justify these decisions often centered on age appropriateness (23.97% of the responses), which is a valid reason for not including a book in a collection. For instance, *Feed* by M. T. Anderson is not intended for an elementary-aged audience. The conceits and concepts of the text require readers who have had sufficient experience reading science fiction and are acquainted with the world of advertising and how goods are “sold” to unsuspecting consumers. Additionally, the main characters are much older than the typical elementary school student.

Other statements of justification (3%) indicated that administrators requested a book be removed from the collection. Administrators must also follow school policy, so teachers and librarians should have the materials for reconsideration at their fingertips in case administrators request a book be removed without following proper procedures. The most startling responses, however, were those that reflected the personal opinions of teachers and librarians. For example, 70.25% of respondents stated that they avoided the purchase of books because they included sex, drugs or drinking, LGBTQ characters, or religious topics.

The last question I asked in the survey was inspired by a conversation I had with a librarian at a workshop where I book-talked new young adult literature. The issue of strong language in some books came up at the end of the session, so we had an

impromptu discussion. I articulated the purpose of the language in the story—authenticity of the situation—as well as the point about following the selection policy. It shocked me when one of the workshop attendees spoke up to say that she used a black marker to cover the offensive words so the book could stay in circulation. She is not alone in her behavior; when asked, 11% of survey respondents admitted to covering up possibly offensive words or passages in books. While this isn't a large number of people, it is too many for a group of educators who should be devoted to providing children with an information-rich environment filled with multiple points of views.

So, what do you do to prevent self-censorship? Unfortunately, there isn't much you can do if you aren't willing to be objective about the books you put in your collection. Teachers and librarians need to closely examine both their collections and selection patterns. They must determine “whether they are positive selectors or negative censors. Do they seek reasons to keep a book, as a selector would do, or do they look for reasons to reject it, as censors do?” (Asheim, 1953). Teachers and librarians need to recognize their personal biases and make every attempt to struggle against them in order to provide a wide range of reading choices for students (Coley, 2002).

## References

- Asheim, L. (1953). Not censorship but selection. *Wilson Library Bulletin*, 28(1), 63–67.
- Coley, K. (2002). Moving toward a method to test for self-censorship by school library media specialists. *School Library Media Research*, 5, 20. Retrieved June 4, 2014, from [http://www.ala.org/aasl/sites/ala.org.aasl/files/content/aaslpubsandjournals/slr/vol5/SLMR\\_TestforSelfCensorship\\_V5.pdf](http://www.ala.org/aasl/sites/ala.org.aasl/files/content/aaslpubsandjournals/slr/vol5/SLMR_TestforSelfCensorship_V5.pdf).
- Hill, R. (2010). The problem of self-censorship. *School Library Monthly*, 27(2), 9–12.
- Whelan, D. (2009). A dirty little secret: Self-censorship. *School Library Journal*, 55(2), 26–30. Retrieved May 29, 2014, from [http://www.slj.com/2009/02/censorship/a-dirty-little-secret-self-censorship/#\\_](http://www.slj.com/2009/02/censorship/a-dirty-little-secret-self-censorship/#_).

**Karin Perry** is an assistant professor of Library Science at Sam Houston State University. You can keep up with her reading on Twitter @kperry, <http://www.goodreads.com/kperry>, or on her blog at <http://www.karinsbooknook.com>.

## Holy Hegemony!: Comics, Race, and Challenging Assumptions about the Readership and Affordances of the Democratic Medium

James Bucky Carter

In 2008, I asserted that not integrating comics and other visual texts into classrooms equated to elitism, classism, and even racism (Carter, 2008). With specific regard to comics, that might seem an overblown assertion, especially if one assumes Whiteness among comics' readership. But can we assume Whiteness? If not, is there more credence to my claim? Does making room for comics in the classroom afford students multicultural casts and diversities of diversities? Could comics be a force of equity fostering inclusion and culturally responsive curricula? And just what *does* the average comic reader look like, anyway?

These questions merit scholarly research, though educators must embrace the fact that some demographic information will necessarily come from market research. Currently, the average American comics reader is considered to be a male between 18 and 40 years old with disposable income. However, “the [comics reading] demographic that seems to be growing the fastest is young women, aged 17–33” (Pantozzi, 2014). Schenker (2014) suggests young women account for 46.67% of the market share. Other studies suggest a readership closer to 20% (I Like Comics Too, 2014), but the numbers are increasing. Comics reading wasn't always considered a boy's domain, of course. Tilley (2014) informs us that comics reading was essentially ubiquitous among all young people in the 1940s and 1950s. As the superhero genre regained a foothold in the 1960s, so too did the male reading majority. We may still assume the average comics reader is male, but female readership is an historic and contemporary force not to ignore.

---

**We may still assume the average comics reader is male, but female readership is an historic and contemporary force not to ignore.**

---

But what about assumed Whiteness? While demographics based on race are hard to find in comics scholarship and market research, the concept of assumed Whiteness among comics readers is strong enough that groups have organized to combat it. We Are Comics (<http://wearecomics.tumblr.com/>) joins organizations like The Nerds of Color “to look at nerd/geek fandom with a culturally critical eye” (<http://thenerdsofcolor.org/about/>) and challenge assumed White, male, and even heteronormative hegemony. The mission statement for We Are Comics reads:

We Are Comics[. . .] And we are a lot more diverse than you might think. We Are Comics is a campaign to show—and celebrate—the faces of our community, our industry, and our culture; to promote the visibility of marginalized members of our population; and to stand in solidarity against harassment and abuse.

All comics readers are encouraged to post photos and their comics-reading history to the organization’s social media pages to

promote a comics fandom that is diverse in as many iterations as “diverse” can take.

Further, while recent education policies like the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) might force a new cultural literacy approach and canon upon teachers, even as other stakeholders favor approaches privileging local texts or texts mirroring individual class’s cultures and ethnicities, teachers should be hesitant to accept

a United States of America-centric sense of the average comics reader, just as they should resist narrowed notions of curriculum. Given strong readerships in France, Belgium, Japan, India, Mexico, Italy, China, and South Korea and the cross-importation of these comics in the global market, assuming the average Earthling comics reader is Anglo may be inaccurate. Most likely, he/she is not a citizen of the US, either, nor is he/she Caucasian.

With the issue of assumed demography suitably challenged, it is worth noting that most American

comics, certainly most super-hero comics, are produced by White people. However, publishers are making concerted efforts to offer increasingly diverse casts. Indeed, while many diversity advocates have asked where the epic heroes of color are in young adult literature, they seem to have overlooked a great place to find them: American super-hero comics.

Marvel team book series like Young Avengers, Avengers Academy, Runaways, and the X-Men have for decades made diversity of import regarding gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality. The latest iteration of Ms. Marvel is Kamala Khan, a Muslim American teenager; Ultimate Spider-Man is Miles Morales, a Black Latino teen. Ava Ayala, the latest White Tiger, is a Latina teen. Excepting Ayala, each carries eponymous titles. Characters like Amadeus Cho, Hazmat, and Nico Minoru are Asian American heroes strong enough to lead teams in the Marvel universe, or, in the case of Cho, to make the Hulk his sidekick!

DC, the other established leader of superhero comics, also has increased efforts to offer more diverse heroes, but perhaps with less fanfare because many of their non-White heroes aren’t young adults, as is the case with every Marvel hero mentioned herein. A noteworthy exception for DC is Jaime Reyes, a teen from El Paso, Texas, who has starred in two ongoing series as the Blue Beetle. The adventures of all of these YA teen heroes of color are found easily in trade paperback via a good online bookstore or a conversation with a knowledgeable comic store owner.

Having challenged possible stereotypical hermeneutics of comics readers, I hope teachers might consider comics as multicultural literature and see their presence in the classroom as one that supports equity, social justice, and culturally responsive learning opportunities. Consider the similarities between rap/hip-hop and comics (especially superhero comics) revealed by Ed Piskor in *Hip Hop Family Tree: Two-In-One* (2014), a book in which he reveals that many pioneers of rap were also inspired by comics. Both rap/hip-hop and comics:

1. are American art forms;
2. have been cultural pariahs;
3. feature urban landscapes;
4. regularly have major figures debut on/in someone else’s song/title;
5. embrace alter egos and costumes;
6. offer epic battles;

---

**While many diversity advocates have asked where the epic heroes of color are in young adult literature, they seem to have overlooked a great place to find them: American super-hero comics.**

---

7. use iconic group representation; and
8. support team-ups/collaborations and cross-overs.

If we're willing to accept rap and hip-hop into our classes—and are eager to show how we're meeting youths where they are by being so culturally attuned—why sidestep a form with clear parallels and from which those urban poets gained inspiration?

Comics are not a certain race's domain, nor a certain gender's or sexuality's. Indeed, many comic scholars, creators, and teachers see comics as the ultimate democratic medium. Sure, we need more demographic research on comics readers, but it is precisely because comics are or can be *anyone's—everyone's*—domain that educators must not overlook their affordances regarding cultural access, diversity, literacy, equity, and social justice.

**James Bucky Carter** studies the intersections of comics and literacy. He earned his doctorate in English Education from the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia and has taught English language arts classes at

the University of Southern Mississippi, the University of Texas at El Paso, and Washington State University.

## References

- Carter, J. B. (2008). Comics, the canon, and the classroom. In N. Frey & D. Fisher (Eds.), *Teaching visual literacy: Using comic books, graphic novels, anime, cartoons, and more to develop comprehension and thinking skills* (pp. 47–60). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- I Like Comics Too. (2014, February 13). Women don't read comics. Retrieved from <http://www.ilikecomicstoo.com/women-dont-read-comics/>.
- Lyga, B. (2007). *Boy toy*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Piskor, E. (2014). *Hip-hop family tree: Two-in-one*. Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics.
- Schenker, B. (2014). Market research says 46.67% of comics readers are female. *The Beat*. Retrieved from <http://comicsbeat.com/market-research-says-46-female-comic-fans/>.
- Tilley, C. L. (2014). Comics: A once-missed opportunity. *The Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults*, 4. Retrieved from <http://www.yalsa.ala.org/jrly/2014/05/comics-a-once-missed-opportunity/#more-208>.



## LAYERED LITERACIES

Susan L. **Groenke**  
and Judson **Laughter**



# Reading, Race, and Responsibility

*This article is also available in an online format that allows direct access to all links included. We encourage you to access it on the ALAN website at <http://www.alan-ya.org/page/the-alan-review-columns>. There, we include the complete texts of the responses we received when we asked Sharon Flake, G. Neri, and Nikki Grimes how race matters in their work.*

We dedicated our last column (Fall 2014) to Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis and hoped that the killings would stop. But, sadly, as we prepared our column for this issue, we were mourning the death of yet another young, Black male—Michael Brown.

Does race matter?

Ask the mothers of Trayvon, Jordan, and Michael. Ask the residents of Sanford and Jacksonville and Ferguson.

Ask White and Black members alike of the police forces involved in these deaths or members of the National Guard troops called in to “keep the peace” in Ferguson (eerily reminiscent of Little Rock in 1957 and Los Angeles in 1992).

Ask President Obama, who learned the hard way not to reveal what he really thinks about Henry Louis Gates’s mistaken arrest in 2009.

Ask young, Black men themselves, youth like Shane Flowers, who put together a powerful video of protest images after Michael Brown’s death and wondered, “Am I next?” ([vimeo.com/103678910](http://vimeo.com/103678910)).

Look in the mirror and ask yourself, as educator Leigh Patel encourages us to do in her blog ([decolonizing.wordpress.com/2014/08/24/an-august-of-ice-bucket-challenges-and-armored-militia/](http://decolonizing.wordpress.com/2014/08/24/an-august-of-ice-bucket-challenges-and-armored-militia/)). She wonders why (White) people will participate in

something like the “ice-bucket challenge,” a campaign to stamp out Lou Gehrig’s disease that went viral over the summer of 2014, but not acknowledge and fight against the debilitating, “human-made” disease of racism. This and similar videos and blog posts offer ready topics for intentional dialogue with all students, bringing viral pop culture into the classroom and offering space for constructive reaction.

Yes, race matters, especially if you are young, Black, and male.

We understand race as physically, socially, legally, and historically constructed around many demographic categories that hold concrete and tangible consequences for *all* youth of color. For this column, we collate many voices speaking to, speaking for, and speaking from youth of color in the midst of an unprecedented period of racial awareness and tension. Most recently, we witnessed this in the anger and heartbreak of Ferguson and Staten Island.

Out of this anger and heartbreak, we must realize we not only have the opportunity to talk about race in our classrooms but a *responsibility* to do so. As biology teacher, Michael Doyle, exhorts in his blog post, “Dear (White) Teachers” (<http://doyle-scienceteach.blogspot.it/2014/08/deat-white-teachers.html>):

Those of us who teach in public schools, who earn our living using public dollars, are obligated as civil servants, and more importantly, as human beings, to carry the discussion of what it means to be public. For us to be people. I teach young adults in a public space. Their space. My space. Our space. Race has been criminalized in our public spaces. Has been for a long, long time. That’s *our* problem.

We may be advised—if not banned—from talking about race in our classrooms, as teachers in Edwards-

ville, Illinois, were at the start of the 2014 school year ([http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/teaching\\_now/2014/08/opinions-of-teachers-lead-district-to-stop-discussions-of-ferguson.html?cmp=SOC-SHR-TW](http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/teaching_now/2014/08/opinions-of-teachers-lead-district-to-stop-discussions-of-ferguson.html?cmp=SOC-SHR-TW)). But if we have learned anything from Ferguson, it is that silence, like colorblindness, helps to maintain a volatile, insidious racial caste system that, as sociology professor Michael Eric Dyson suggests ([www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/michael-eric-dyson-obamas-remarks-on-ferguson-are-tone-deaf-and-disappointing/2014/08/22/f93ec7e2-2981-11e4-8593-da634b334390\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/michael-eric-dyson-obamas-remarks-on-ferguson-are-tone-deaf-and-disappointing/2014/08/22/f93ec7e2-2981-11e4-8593-da634b334390_story.html)), can be characterized by

[d]ecades of police aggression. The repeated killing of unarmed black people. The desperate poverty of black citizens. The bias in the criminal justice system. The raging social inequality. The intended or inadvertent disenfranchisement of large swaths of the citizenry. The dim prospects of upward mobility that grow bleaker by the day . . . [and having to] . . . use extraordinary measures, including protests in the streets, appearances in the media, and appeals to local and national leaders to amplify their grievances, just to end up where white citizens begin.

Our silence implicates us in holding up this system. In this column, we provide resources to help you break the silence, lose the blinders, and get started reclaiming your classroom as the public *raced* space it is.

First we feature youth activist, author, and English teacher educator sj Miller and his Padlet bulletin board, titled *I Am Michael Brown* ([padlet.com/sosefit/s8sb13vvnv519](http://padlet.com/sosefit/s8sb13vvnv519)). sj explains how the creation of the multimedia board was “a personal response to Michael Brown’s death,” motivated by feelings of rage:

I was incensed by the tragic killing of Michael Brown. When I cannot put words to rage I tend to express it across modalities. I want to turn my rage into action and so I will use this to teach my students how they can also move from rage to action. As I listen to their responses to these images, songs, poems, and TV newscasts, I hope this lesson becomes a source of growth for all of us. I need it to.

Padlet ([padlet.com](http://padlet.com)) is a free application that allows users to create an online bulletin board to display information about any topic.

Included on sj’s board are a timeline of events surrounding Michael Brown’s death; powerful photographs—Michael Brown and his family members, scenes from the protests, “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” images; clips from TV news segments and newspaper coverage; lyrics and video to Lauryn Hill’s song,

“Black Rage” (Hill released and dedicated the song in support of Ferguson); discussion questions; extensions for teaching and activism; and much, much more. With the photograph of Michael Brown’s body lying in the street as its central image, the online bulletin board provokes viewers to emotionally engage with Michael Brown’s death and its aftermath through multiple media and to consider how media and social media influence our understandings about and participation in race matters and social activism.

Platforms like Padlet offer students an arena in which to explore others’ reactions to such events and then construct their own response. Padlet makes multimodal presentations easy to build through combinations of audiovisual elements and text. Check out Padlet’s Gallery ([padlet.com/gallery](http://padlet.com/gallery)) to see examples created to facilitate discussions, notetaking, and the reading of classic texts like *The Odyssey*.

Next, we feature a YouTube video created by students at Roseville High School in Minnesota ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gy4u44FZk94](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gy4u44FZk94)) as audience response to Sharon Flake’s short story/poem collection, *You Don’t Even Know Me: Stories and Poems about Boys*. In the poem, as in the video, we meet various, young, Black men who are frustrated that their teachers, neighbors, and even friends often fall prey to the negative and limiting stereotypes and discourses that try to dominate their life narratives. There’s the geometry and physics buff whose teacher tells him he should be happy with a C. There’s the boy on the block whose neighbor is like a second mother until she sees him with his friends. Then he’s . . .

Just another black boy,  
A threatening, scary sight,  
A tall, black, eerie shadow  
Moving toward you late at night.

There’s the boy who dreams of rebuilding cities, but his friend just wants to talk about basketball and tells him

---

**In this column, we provide resources to help you break the silence, lose the blinders, and get started reclaiming your classroom as the public *raced* space it is.**

---

to “quit fronting” and “pretending that [you’re] better than you know [you] really are.” The repeating stanza of the poem has the boys collectively wondering . . .

. . . how could it be  
That you’re around me so often  
And still don’t know a thing about me?

Indeed, how could it be? Paired with sj Miller’s Padlet bulletin board, this video begs the questions: *What role do the media play in shaping our assumptions about youth of color? How can we use media to “talk*

*back to” negative assumptions and discourses?*

---

## **What role do the media play in shaping our assumptions about youth of color? How can we use media to “talk back to” negative assumptions and discourses?**

---

We believe it is important for students not just to consume these media but to be active in creating their own responses, to “talk back to” what they hear and see. By engaging in critical media literacy in light of current events, students can explore the construction of media messages, learn about their embedded languages and biases, and discover how

people experience these events differently. We encourage you to share the video with students and invite them to write and publish their own “talk back” poems to the discourses that strive to limit their dreams.

You might also consider pairing the video with another powerful YouTube video, Daniel Beaty’s *Knock Knock* ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=RTZrPVqR0D8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RTZrPVqR0D8)), and have students write and perform their own “Knock Knock” poems. We also think teachers could make interesting connections between the videos and Nikki Giovanni’s poem, “Ego Tripping,” and Langston Hughes’s classic poem, “A Dream Deferred.” These videos might give teachers pause: Do you fall prey to the stereotypes that strive to define your students? Do you “know” your students?

Get to know them. And talk to them about race.

When we reached out to Sharon Flake to find out how race matters in her work, she responded:

Race matters. Our children are not fools; they see that it does as well. . . . That is why we must be open and brave enough to discuss such things with our young ones. To

speak up against racism and sexism when we witness it. And to create characters that cannot just speak to the issue, but do so in a wholly unique way that makes young people and adults alike eager to read such stories.

She is definitely raising race as an issue in unique ways. Get to know her work, and check out her website ([sharongflake.com](http://sharongflake.com)), which includes discussion guides for teachers wanting their students to engage with her works.

G. Neri’s graphic novel, *Yummy*, published by Lee & Low in 2010, tells the tragic story of Robert “Yummy” Sandifer, an 11-year-old boy who lived in the Roseland area of Chicago in the early ’80s. When Yummy, who has been initiated into a gang, accidentally shoots a popular neighborhood girl and sparks a national news story and police hunt, he must go into hiding and is ultimately killed by one of his own gang members. Yummy became the poster child for youth gang violence in America when these events led to his appearance on the cover of *Time Magazine* in September 1994 ([content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19940919,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19940919,00.html)).

In writing the book, Neri drew from the multiple and varied aspects of Yummy’s story, as provided by the coverage of many Chicago news organizations, including the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Chicago Sun Times*. Neri explains, “I read everything about the incident, lots of detailed daily reporting, in-depth coverage, court transcripts. I talked to experts on the gang and did my own personal research with gangs in Compton. I even went to Chicago to see all the points in the story myself, including the spot where Yummy died.”

While we see exciting nonfiction teaching opportunities with this graphic novel, like a study of how to tell an authentic news story, it is the hard questions the novel poses that make it an important work to discuss with students. As Neri suggests in the Author’s Note, the book asks, “Was Yummy a cold-blooded killer or a victim?” Neri explains, “The answer is not black-and-white. Yummy was both. . . . he deserves our anger and our understanding.” We encourage you to use this book with your students to consider the questions it poses and what we need to “understand” about Yummy and the many youth who face similar life circumstances. We couldn’t help but hear Michael Brown’s mother’s words ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=K8Lsn8xVc5U](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K8Lsn8xVc5U))



in our ears as we reread this book in the preparation of this column: “Do you know how hard it was for me to get him to stay in school and graduate? You know how many Black men graduate? Not many. Because you bring them down to this type of level, where they feel like they don’t got nothing to live for anyway.”

We’re big fans of G. Neri, a former teacher in South Central L.A. who has become well known for his varied and diverse works for young people, including the free-verse novella *Chess Rumble* (2008), which received a Lee Bennett Hopkins Poetry Award; *Ghetto Cowboy* (2011), winner of a Horace Mann Upstanders Book Award; the young adult novels *Surf Mules* (2014) and *Knockout Games* (2014); and most recently, his picture book, *Hello, I’m Johnny Cash* (2014).

When we asked him why he works in such varied, layered media, Neri responded that he sees each project as a “living thing”:

[The story] knows what it wants to be and my job is to help it come into the world with its voice intact. For instance, with *Yummy*, I thought it was going to be a movie, but it wanted to be a graphic novel. *What* had to do with the *why*—the movie would have been rated R and skipped the audience who needed to see it: young boys getting sucked into gangs. Problem: they didn’t read but, like me, they loved comics. Boom. Telling this heavy story in comic format got a lot of non-readers reading.

We wonder how often writing in the classroom is allowed to follow this organic path used by “real” writers. Instead of assigning a multimodal project or a persuasive essay, perhaps students might benefit from seeing where the composition takes them, no matter the media. The teacher’s job, in such an instance, would be to prepare support and scaffolding for the student-selected medium.

G. Neri says the goal of his work is to “get non-readers reading.” The easiest way to do that, he says, “is to give them books that speak to them, books that make students say ‘This book is about me—this is my world.’” One way Neri does this is by using what he calls “urban speak”:

I write the way many of them talk—urban speak—and they hear a voice they can relate to that they rarely see in print. Because of that, I also hear things like my books are amongst the most stolen from libraries—something of which I am dubiously proud. My readers tend to be part of the minority majority—the silent many. As of 2014, kids are more than 50% “minority,” which means we gotta stop referring to ourselves as such. The minority majority may not be as

big on reading as a whole, but that’s largely because of the lack of books out there that speak to them. Once they find that book—watch out.

G. Neri sees his books as essential stepping stones on the bridge toward reading. As he suggests, youth of color who may be reluctant to read may become motivated when they see themselves and hear their voices in books. Perhaps we must begin to make specific spaces in the classroom for students’ voices to be captured in writing or other compositions. We trust that drawing on students’ linguistic funds of knowledge would only motivate them to pursue meaningful and relevant projects.

This motivation can lead young readers to other kinds of books. For online resources to assist you in teaching *Yummy* and other graphic novels, check out the “Graphic Texts in the Classroom” blog page for this book ([classroomcomics.wordpress.com/2010/11/07/yummy-the-last-days-of-a-southside-shorty-by-g-neri-illustrated-by-randy-duburke/](http://classroomcomics.wordpress.com/2010/11/07/yummy-the-last-days-of-a-southside-shorty-by-g-neri-illustrated-by-randy-duburke/)), the book talk interview with G. Neri, and the Teacher’s Guide at the Lee & Low website ([www.leeandlow.com](http://www.leeandlow.com)).

Finally, we want to make sure you know about Nikki Grimes’s blog, *Nikki Sounds Off: An Occasional Blog* ([www.nikkigrimes.com/blog/](http://www.nikkigrimes.com/blog/)). Nikki Grimes is an author and illustrator who travels the world to share her poetry and books. Her YA novels include *Jazmin’s Notebook* (2000); *Bronx Masquerade* (2003); *The Road to Paris* (2008); *Dark Sons* (2010); and *Planet Middle School* (2011). Grimes’s newest book for young adults, *Words with Wings*, received a 2014 Coretta Scott King Honor Award. She is also the author of many children’s books and coauthor (with R. Gregory Christie) of the popular *Dyamonde Daniel* series.

You might not be as familiar with her blog, which is why we mention it here. There, you can read Ms. Grimes’s thoughts on the Ferguson shooting, her lamentations over the lack of films based on children’s and YA titles written by authors of color, and her book

---

**Instead of assigning a multimodal project or a persuasive essay, perhaps students might benefit from seeing where the composition takes them, no matter the media.**

---

recommendations (including Kekla Magoon’s newest book, *How It Went Down*, which Grimes describes as “exploring the complexities of race and gun violence in an even-handed way”)—all good stuff to support your use of Grimes’s works in your classroom.

When we reached out to Nikki Grimes and asked her how race matters in the writing she does for young people, she explained that she sees her books as being for *all* readers and warns against what she calls the “ghettoization of children’s literature”:

Consider the issue this way: Were I to suggest that only white children should read *Charlotte’s Web*, the average person, educator or not, would find that patently absurd, wouldn’t you? And yet, otherwise intelligent people regularly imply that books featuring characters of color should only be shared with children of color. Now *that’s* what I call patently absurd, and so should you. But here we are, discussing this very notion.

She also told us a story of one mother who would not allow her daughter to have a copy of *Meet Danitra Brown* because of the African American characters on the cover:

I address the issue whenever I have an opportunity to speak to the gatekeepers, namely teachers, librarians, and booksellers. These are the people who, in the main, along with a child’s parents, determine what books end up in the hands of young readers. A shift in their thinking is sorely needed.

We all have layered lives and identities and so should engage with books containing layered contexts and characters. It serves no one to prejudge which layers are appropriate for which readers. As teachers, we need to supply students with texts that reflect them and all members of society in authentic ways.

Yes, race matters.

And we repeat, we must realize we not only have the opportunity to talk about race in our classrooms but a *responsibility* to do so. We must not become gatekeepers who hold back from real discussions about real lives just because we’re not comfortable talking about race or we think it’s not appropriate.

It is appropriate.

It is necessary.

It matters.

**Susan L. Groenke** is associate professor of English Education at the University of Tennessee and directs the Center for Children’s and Young Adult Literature on the UTK campus. Dr. Groenke teaches courses on young adult literature and secondary English methods. Her research interests center on adolescent reading engagement and the motivation to read. When she is not reading young adult novels, she can be found walking her dog Bootleg or driving down the road with her husband in their 1978 VW bus.

**Judson Laughter** is an assistant professor of English Education at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. His research interests include multicultural teacher education, critical race theory, and the preparation of preservice teachers for diverse classrooms through dialogue and narrative. Dr. Laughter is currently the advisor for the Track I (non-licensure) English Education program. He teaches courses in English methods, action research, sociolinguistics, and trends in education. When not wearing his academic hat, Jud enjoys crossword puzzles, cycling, and traveling.

## A Rambling Rant about Race and Writing

It started with a hashtag and an open-ended statement: #WeNeedDiverseBooks because \_\_\_\_\_. A group of children's/YA authors and industry professionals created a Tumblr page titled, <http://weneeddiversebooks.tumblr.com/>, and centered on this mission: "We Need Diverse Books is a grassroots organization created to address the lack of diverse, non-majority narratives in children's literature. We Need Diverse Books is committed to the ideal that embracing diversity will lead to acceptance, empathy, and ultimately equality." This effort served as a public call to action. Fill in the blank. Take a photo. Post it. Lots of people did. Kids, adults, readers, authors, and people of different races, religions, and sexual orientations. Different. Diverse. I watched this trending on social media and almost didn't respond, thinking, "What everyone else is saying is great. There's probably not much more I can contribute to the conversation." However, in the end, I decided to throw in my own hashtagged photo. I wrote: "We need diverse books because . . . this generation of 'minority' kids will grow up to be the majority. Duh."



The United States Census Bureau reports that "50.4 percent of our nation's population younger than age 1 were minorities as of July 1, 2011." That's right. When these kids grow up, they will be in the majority. That toddler you see today will be informing public policy and attitudes tomorrow.

After I uploaded my photo on social media, it started to get retweeted and "liked" and shared, and some of my Facebook friends asked me a question in private. It was a good question, one I've been asked so many times before. So I posted it to the public:

"What do you think? Yesterday more than three, but less than twelve, asked me if a person could write about a race/ethnicity they do not belong to. I have an opinion about this, but before I state it, I am interested in yours . . ."

I thought a few people might respond but was taken aback when more than 200 did. Their comments were questioning, angry, apologetic, heartfelt, confused—the gamut. I was heartened to see how passionately people felt about this subject. Initially, I was going to answer my own question with just a "yes," and my reasoning was "because." But the more I started to think about it, the more my thoughts began to crystalize.

As one of my editors, Cheryl Klein from Arthur A. Levine Books/Scholastic, noted in the Facebook comments, I have written outside of my race multiple times. Hell, I have written outside of my religion, my sex, my sexual orientation, my political beliefs, my geographical upbringing, my height. Why? Because I am an artist, not an autobiographer.

It's funny, but a halo of Asian-ness was dropped on me when I became an author. Prior to that, race was something I wore but didn't think about, like the

color of my eyes (brown) or my hair (black). However, once my first novel, *Millicent Min, Girl Genius*, came out in 2003, I ceased to be “Lisa Yee” and became, “Lisa Yee, Chinese American author.” Suddenly people noticed me because of the spectacle of

me being Asian in an arena where there were very few of us. Because I had written a book about someone who was Asian. Because, because, because. And it took me by surprise.

“Where are you from?” I’ve been asked so many times that it could be my mantra. I know what the questioners mean; they want to know my race.

Sometimes I say, “I’m Chinese American.” But more often I say, “I am from Los Angeles,” only to hear back, “But where are you *from*?” Though I’ve heard this all of my life, it became louder as an author because I was out there—out in public doing school visits, signing books, speaking at conferences. Me and my Asian face.

Strangers have felt compelled to tell me that their cousin’s friend adopted a daughter from China, that the Chinese restaurant in their town was the best, or that it was interesting that I looked exactly like that neighbor of theirs who was Japanese, or Korean, or Chinese. I have been told that my English is quite good. I have been told that I am a credit to my race. I have been mistaken for Grace Lin, for Paula Yoo, for Linda Sue Park, and for any other female Asian American author out there. One time, a woman congratulated me on a book Lisa See had written. When I explained I was not the author of that book, she asked, “Are you sure?”

Over time, the halo of Asian-ness that had alighted over my head began to slip and tighten around me, binding my arms to my sides. Constricting me. It tried to limit who I was and what I could write. Things were expected of me. Because I was Asian, I was expected to write about that. Why was race so important? Why did this even matter? Why couldn’t I just write? My being an Asian American was no big deal. Well, not to me.

I remember speaking at a mostly all-White school in the Midwest. After, a young Korean American boy pushed his way up to see me. He just stood there and grinned, and at first I didn’t know why.

“You look like me,” he finally said.

So there I was, with my Asian-ness on display, when it hit me. I grew up in Los Angeles where Latinos, Blacks, Asians, are commonplace. But there, in that small town in the Midwest, it was just the two of us in that big auditorium. For that boy, to see another Asian American, one who had just stood on a stage to speak to his school, it was a big deal to have met me. And it was a big deal for me to have met him because, even though we were strangers, we had a lot in common.

I travel a lot. At every school I have visited where there are few Asian Americans, without fail, some of those students wait for me after I have spoken. We greet one another like old friends, albeit meeting for the first time. For now that I have seen outside of the bubble that is Los Angeles or New York, which I visit often, I have noted that the country between the west and east coasts is not as integrated as I thought it was when I was growing up.

When I was a child, there were no Asian American authors I knew of. I had no role models. There were no books about people like me—a third generation Chinese American girl growing up in the suburbs. The most famous Asian American I knew of was news anchor Connie Chung, and she wasn’t a writer.

When I graduated from college, I wrote from a White, male, Southern point of view. Why? Because that’s what I was reading. It was what I knew. The stories of Truman Capote, Thomas Wolfe, and Walker Percy, the plays of Tennessee Williams. We emulate those around us, and it hadn’t occurred to me that I could write like myself. I was still trying to figure out who I was.

When I wrote *Millicent Min, Girl Genius*, it was without a political agenda. It was not calculated. My editor, Arthur Levine, never told me that no one else had written about a contemporary Chinese American girl. I was blissfully unaware. I didn’t set out to break any barriers. I just wrote about a girl who was Chinese American because that’s who she was. That’s who I was. *Millicent*’s story is not about issues of race. It is about issues of growing up. Of loneliness

---

**When these kids grow up, they will be in the majority. That toddler you see today will be informing public policy and attitudes tomorrow.**

---

and of self-doubt. Even though she is a genius, she is still a kid. Her race is just part of the fabric of the story and by no means the focus.

Later I was told that it was the first time a contemporary photo of an Asian American girl was used on a mainstream novel for young people.

My second book, *Stanford Wong Flunks Big-Time* (2005), features Millicent's enemy, a Chinese American basketball player who is flunking a class. What? An Asian failing school? How can that be? Well it can be, and it does happen. But more than that, it is the story of a boy who feels that he is letting his father down. I hear from a lot of boys about this book. One student, a White boy with blonde hair from Texas, told me, "Stanford is exactly like me." He didn't identify with Stanford's race; he identified with Stanford as a person.

There are volumes of books touting the secrets to publication. And there are people who will try to dictate what you write about. However, I believe that, to be a good author, the impetus comes from within, and you must write well and write a story that is engaging and compelling. Do that, and an understanding about the race or religion or sexual orientation of your characters will follow. Do not lead with social issues; lead with a well-rounded character, and see where that takes you.

I am not an Asian author. I am an author who is Asian. There is a difference.

I believe that it is the right of all artists to determine what they create and not have that dictated to them. I've heard that I've let readers down because my books were not "Asian enough." WTF? One critic wrote that I had missed the mark because my characters did not discuss race. Um. No. When I was in school, we didn't sit around discussing the social ramifications of our race on our relationships with peers; we talked about how much we hated math, whether or not bangs looked good on a round face, and whether Dana's tattoo was real or temporary.

Even if I wanted to write the definitive *Look at Me, I Am Asian, and I Have Overcome Adversity* novel, I don't think I could. Being Asian doesn't automatically make you an expert on all things Asian, any more than researching does. When writing *Good Luck, Ivy* (2007), an American Girl book about a third-generation Asian American, I consulted with experts on things like Chinese school, because even though I am Chinese, I never went to one.

You have to get it right—whether you are writing about your race or someone else's. This also goes for religion, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, ownership of a particular breed of dog, everything. There is nothing more insulting to a reader than if a writer gets things wrong. You will instantly lose your credibility, your readers will abandon you, and some people will think you are stupid.

It is arrogant to think that just because you sympathize with someone or something, that makes you an expert. Don't automatically assume you know exactly how someone else feels. Because you don't, any more than I would know exactly how an LGBTQ kid or a Holocaust survivor feels.

Do not presume—but do dare to imagine.

And then talk to people. Talk to people who know more than you do about your subject. Talk to them in person. On the phone. Through emails and letters. Googling is not enough.

When writing *Warp Speed* (2011), about a (White male) Star Trek geek who gets beat up every day at school, I was so focused on getting the Klingon correct so as not to offend the Trekkie culture that I wrote that Earth is the largest planet. (Apparently, Jupiter is our largest planet—and yes, some people think I am stupid.) Sometimes we are so busy fussing about details that we miss the obvious.

Three of my novels feature White protagonists. Five of my books feature mixed race kids, including my latest YA, *The Kidney Hypothetical—Or How to Ruin Your Life in Seven Days* (2015). Five of my main characters are male; one is Jewish. The main characters of three of my books are Chinese American.

As for needing/wanting more authors who are POC (and by the way, I hate that phrase, "People of Color," but I suppose it's not as bad as what it really means—PWANW, a.k.a. People Who Are Not White), yes. Yes, we need POC authors. More POC authors. Yes. This, folks, is a no brainer.

Why? Because there is an innate knowledge that one can gain from experience, from living a life one writes about. But more than that, the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC), states that, in 2013, the breakdown of available books for young readers is as follows:

"We [CCBC] received approximately 3,200 books at the CCBC in 2013. Of those,

- 93 books had significant African or African American content.
- 67 books were by Black authors and/or illustrators.
- 34 books had American Indian themes, topics, or characters.
- 18 books were by American Indian authors and/or illustrators.
- 61 books had significant Asian/Pacific or Asian/Pacific American content.
- 88 books were by authors and/or illustrators of Asian/Pacific heritage.
- 57 books had significant Latino content.
- 48 books were by Latino authors and/or illustrators.”

More about this can be found here: <https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pcstats.asp>.

By no means am I saying that one cannot write outside one’s race/ethnicity. I have. However, I am pointing out that, when you look at the big picture, the numbers of POC authors are dismal.

We need to encourage publishers, book buyers, and readers to be less exclusive and more inclusive. I should also note that race hasn’t adversely affected my sales. *Millicent Min, Girl Genius*, for example, has sold about 500,000 copies. We need more POC authors, and more LGBTQ authors, and more diverse authors, just like we need more diverse books.

That said, I repeat that the books need to be well written. *Any* book needs to be well written before it is published. No one should get a break here. But what we should get is acknowledgement that there is an invisible wall that separates authors who are traditionally in the forefront and those who are clamoring to be heard.

Recently, Chipotle, the Mexican fast food grill that serves burritos as big as your head, announced that it would include short stories on its packaging. Brilliant move. I read ingredients on cereal boxes, so this is a big step up. However, of the writers selected by award-winning author Jonathan Safran Foer, not one was Latino. Chipotle says on its website: “A big goal at Chipotle is to bridge the cultural and linguistic gaps between Chipotle employees. So there is a whole team dedicated to empowering, educating, and training employees to increase internal promotions, **cultural sensitivity**, and communication skills.” I boldfaced “cultural sensitivity,” not Chipotle.

I don’t think the exclusion was done with malice; I think that it was an oversight, albeit a big one. Yet,

so many POC are tired of being oversights. People write books because they have something to say. Let’s try putting some POC authors and more diverse authors at the front and center for a change. We are not trying to take over the world. We are just tired of raising our hands and not being called on.

There is no quota for books that I know of. There is no “do not exceed” number that would cause a publishing house to implode if it published just one more book. Who knows? That book might just be by a POC author. Or it might be from an LGBTQ author. Or it might be from an author exploring not what they know, but what they want to know about, whether that be race or religion or sexual orientation or what it’s like to wake up one morning and be a bug.

I apologize if I’ve been ranting and rambling. I’ve probably contradicted myself within these paragraphs. That’s because I’m still trying to figure it all out. It’s complicated. And yet, it isn’t. This much I know for sure—if a person has the passion and skill for writing a story that must be told, nothing should hold them back from telling it. There is room for all of us.

*Lisa Yee’s 2003 debut book, Millicent Min, Girl Genius, won the prestigious Sid Fleischman Humor Award. Since then, she has written ten more novels, including Stanford Wong Flunks Big-Time, Absolutely Maybe, and Warp Speed. Her latest YA novel from Arthur A. Levine Books/Scholastic, The Kidney Hypothetical—Or How to Ruin Your Life in Seven Days, covers the last seven high school days of a popular senior who cheated on his Harvard application. A Thurber House Children’s Writer-in-Residence, Lisa has been named a Fox Sports Network “American in Focus,” Publishers Weekly Flying Start, and USA Today Critics’ Top Pick. Visit Lisa at www.lisayee.com or on Facebook, where she practices the art of procrastination.*

## References

- United States Census Bureau. (2012, May 17). *Most children younger than age 1 are minorities, census bureau reports*. Retrieved June 11, 2014, from <http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/population/cb12-90.html>.
- Yee, L. (2007). *Good luck, Ivy*. Middleton, WI: American Girl.
- Yee, L. (2015). *The kidney hypothetical—or how to ruin your life in seven days*. New York, NY: Arthur A. Levine.
- Yee, L. (2003). *Millicent Min, girl genius*. New York, NY: Arthur A. Levine.
- Yee, L. (2005). *Stanford Wong flunks big-time*. New York, NY: Arthur A. Levine.
- Yee, L. (2011). *Warp speed*. New York, NY: Arthur A. Levine.

# Save the date!

## 2015 NCTE Annual Convention

*Responsibility, Creativity, and the Arts of Language*

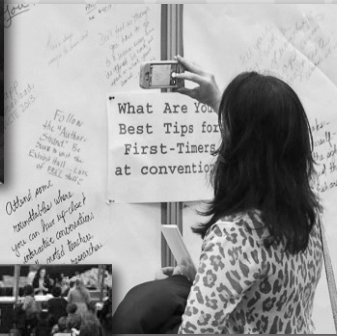
November 19–22

Minneapolis, MN

Postconvention Workshops

November 23–24

For more information,  
visit [www.ncte.org/annual](http://www.ncte.org/annual)



ANNUAL CONVENTION

# NCTE

MINNEAPOLIS, MN 2015



# NCTE PRESENTS...

## Reading Shakespeare Film First

Mary Ellen Dakin

179 pp. 2012. Grades 9–12

ISBN 978-0-8141-3907-3 • No. 39073

\$27.95 member/\$37.95 nonmember

Studying Shakespeare in the high school classroom can and sometimes should begin with images and film. In *Reading Shakespeare Film First*, Mary Ellen Dakin asserts that we need to read Shakespeare in triplicate—as the stuff of transformative literature, theater, and film. The potential for the mutual reinforcement and transfer of 21st century literacy skills between text and film is too promising for classroom teachers to overlook.

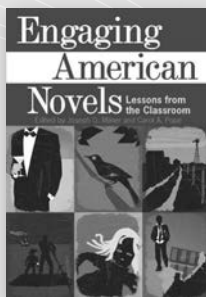


# NCTE

National Council of Teachers of English

To order, visit our website: <https://secure.ncte.org/store/> or call 877-369-6283.

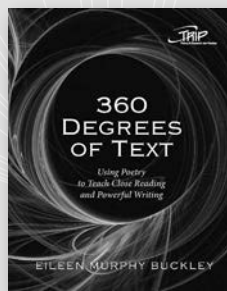
## Reading for Meaning



### Engaging American Novels Lessons from the Classroom

Joseph O. Milner and Carol A. Pope, editors

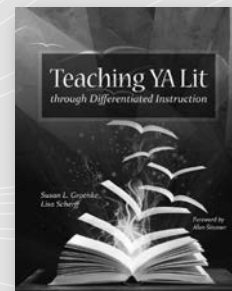
ISBN: 978-0-8141-1358-5 No. 13585  
\$31.95 member/\$42.95 nonmember



### 360 Degrees of Text Using Poetry to Teach Close Reading and Powerful Writing

Eileen Murphy Buckley

ISBN: 978-0-8141-6023-7 No. 60237  
\$31.95 member/\$42.95 nonmember



### Teaching YA Lit through Differentiated Instruction

Susan L. Groenke and Lisa Scherff

ISBN: 978-0-8141-3370-5 No. 33705  
\$29.95 member/\$39.95 nonmember

# NCTE

Nat

Shaping literacy for tomorrow, today.

Visit our website: <https://secure.ncte.org/store/> or call toll-free: 1-877-369-6283