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Troubling Ideologies:

Creating Opportunities for Students to Interrogate Cultural Models in YA Literature

> The first priority is to understand how the ideology of any given book can be located. Above all, such an understanding is important for teachers, especially primary school teachers and English specialists. Their task is to teach children *how* to read . . . [so that the] child will not be at the mercy of *what* she reads. (Hollindale, 1988, p. 19, emphasis added)

Arguments for teaching Young Adult (YA) literature celebrate its ability to foster self-understanding and empathy for others (e.g., Connors, 2014; O'Donnell, 2011). Because YA literature depicts adolescent characters grappling with issues that are presumably important to teenagers, it is also thought to engage readers in ways that literature written for adults might not, leading to further reading. Given that many works of YA fiction depict adolescents struggling to reconcile their relationship with institutions such as school, religion, family, and so on, the genre can appear to present teenagers as agentive beings. As Trites (2000) argues, however, YA literature also constitutes an institution in that it socializes teenagers to accept adult ideologies and values. In most cases, an adult author stands behind a YA text. Likewise, adult characters often voice the ideologies that adolescent readers are expected to embrace (Trites, 2000). These ideologies can position adolescents as agentive, or they can reinforce the status quo and perpetuate problematic power imbalances. Either way, as Trites (2000) argues, in the case of YA literature, "power is everywhere" (p. x).

Arguments about what kinds of books adults believe adolescents ought to read are also implicated in ideology and power. Writing for the *Wall Street Journal,* Gurdon (2011) asked how continued exposure to what she characterized as the dark, lurid subject matter of contemporary YA fiction might impact adolescent readers. "If you think it matters what is inside a young person's mind," Gurden wrote, "surely it is of consequence what he reads" (para. 7). Advocates of YA literature responded by arguing that adolescents benefit when they read about characters like themselves facing complex issues and problems. For some, Gurdon's article constituted a moral panic that threatened the value of YA fiction in the lives of adolescents. In the weeks that followed, a number of teachers and librarians took to Twitter to defend YA fiction and express their belief in the cathartic power of stories of adolescence using the hashtag #yasaves.

We do not intend to take sides in this debate here, and we suspect that both parties ascribe too much power to literary texts while underestimating the transactional nature of reading. At the same time, we wonder, does YA literature have the potential both to stimulate readers who are otherwise put off by much school-sanctioned literature and to reify problematic ideologies about adolescents and their relationships to the people and the world around them?

In asking this question, we have something considerably more complex in mind than simplistic arguments that conceptualize readers as empty vessels who act out events they read about. Books do not imprint themselves on readers. Rather, as Rosenblatt (1938/1995, 1978) and other reader response theorists argue, readers actively construct meaning in their transactions with literary texts. Nevertheless,

Rosenblatt's insistence that a person's experiences reading literature constitute a form of *real* (as opposed to virtual) experience has led scholars such as Bogdan (1992) to argue that "things *happen* to people when they read, some of them negative" (p. 132, emphasis in original). Bogdan writes, "Whether it is feminist, nationalist, pluralist, or consumerist, the bias inscribed in every literature curriculum makes it problematic to speak of the educational value of literature as self-evident, intrinsic, ideologically neutral, or morally inviolate in unqualified terms" (p. 151).

In this article, we build on Bogdan's (1992) observation, arguing that YA literature is not ideologically neutral. It is always already implicated in ideologies, and individual works of YA fiction, like canonical literature, interpolate readers in particular ways. Put another way, literary texts position readers as certain types of subjects with certain worldviews, beliefs, values, and ethics. As a result, whereas individual YA novels can expose readers to liberating ideologies, they can also reinforce the status quo and reify existing power imbalances, thus further marginalizing some readers. For example, a work of YA fiction might portray characters that disrupt traditional gender roles at the same time that it reinforces other stereotypes about sexuality.

Reading is exceedingly complex, and savvy readers can always exercise their agency to resist the subject positions that literary texts invite them to occupy. To do so, however, they must recognize how a text positions them, which entails asking the question, "Who does this text assume I am?" Acknowledging that YA literature has the potential to marginalize some readers may entail a paradigm shift for educators accustomed to celebrating its ability to engage readers and promote reading. Like Schwarz (2014), we argue that what is currently lacking in discussions about YA literature in the field of literacy education "are questions of quality, purpose, ethical value, and worldview" (p. 20). To counter this, Schwarz recommends approaching YA literature more critically. In addition to making oppressive ideologies visible, she argues that reading critically can "reveal to readers more about their own beliefs, ideas, and approaches to reading—what Schraw and Bruning (1996) call readers' 'implicit models of reading'" (pp. 20–21). This critical approach to teaching and reading YA literature is guided by a two-fold concern: in addition to interrogating the ethics and ideologies of texts, it invites readers to examine the ethics and ideologies they bring to texts.

Our purpose here is to describe an instructional activity that builds on the concept of cultural models (Gee, 2012; Holland & Quinn, 1987; Shore, 1996) and invites students, whether in teacher education programs or secondary English classes, to interrogate YA fiction with the intention of understanding how individual texts reinforce and/or complicate single stories (Adichie, 2009) about issues including, but not limited to, class, race, gender, and sexual orientation. To begin, we introduce the concept of cultural models and examine its relevance to literary reading. Next, we introduce an activity that we use to challenge preservice teachers with whom we work to interrogate how individual works of YA literature reinforce or complicate dominant cultural models. We then illustrate how the activity can be taken up to promote critical conversations in classrooms by applying it to two novels that are widely regarded as tackling social justice issues: S. E. Hinton's (1967/2006) *The Outsiders* and Matt de la Peña's (2009) *We Were Here*.

Cultural Models

Holland and Quinn (1987) define cultural models as "taken-for-granted models of the world that are widely shared (although not necessarily to the exclusion of other, alternative models) by the members of a society and that play an enormous role in their understanding of that world and their behavior in it" (p. 4). Cultural models are comparable to what developmental psychologists call schemas—organized systems of thought that make it possible for people to act in (and on) the world. Humans have access to a potentially limitless array of cultural models that allow them to make meaning out of their experiences. Indeed, without them, we would struggle to make sense of the world.

Shore (1996) distinguishes between two kinds of mental models: those that are personal, and those that we inherit as a result of our standing in social or cultural groups. For Shore, *personal mental models* are idiosyncratic. For example, he explains that the mental maps we construct to navigate our neighborhoods may foreground landmarks that are salient to us as individuals or reflect the unique modes of transportation we use to move around our communi-

ties (e.g., commuting to work by car as opposed to traveling on foot). In contrast, *cultural models* are conventional. Unlike personal models, they reflect the shared cognitive resources a community makes available to its members. For example, Shore (1996) argues that sports fans in a stadium draw on a cultural model when they stand and remove their caps when "The Star-Spangled Banner" is played prior to the start of a baseball game. Likewise, we draw on cultural models to know how to conduct ourselves in upscale restaurants as opposed to fast-food joints and how to dress for a friend's barbecue as opposed to a job interview. In each instance, the cultural models on which we draw structure and guide our behavior.

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As explained, cultural models allow us to act in (and on) the world, but they can also produce conflicts and misunderstandings. Like Gee (2012), Shore (1996) argues that cultural models are schematized. "Details are reduced in complexity and at times eliminated altogether, while salient features . . . are selected and sometimes exaggerated or otherwise transformed by a process of formalization and simplification" (p. 47). Applied to people, cultural models can promote essentialism, with the result that whole groups of people are reduced to a few recognizable qualities or features. We saw this recently when a conservative media pundit, responding to a decision by some professional athletes to wear t-shirts with the phrase "I can't breathe" to protest the killing of Eric Garner, drew on a particularly insidious cultural model to argue that members of the African American community should instead wear t-shirts adorned with the phrase "Don't abandon your children" (Rothkopf, 2014). This is how stereotypes are born. As Adichie (2009) argues, "The problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete" (n. p.). Blind adherence to cultural models can impede our ability to consider this.

As teacher educators preparing future teachers to work with diverse student populations, we are interested in the tensions that arise when different cultural models come in contact with one another. For example, in our local schools, competing cultural models exist and attempt to explain why some students perform better than others in the classroom (they are "better" students versus their dominant literacy practices map onto those sanctioned by schools), as well as whether evolution ought to occupy a place in the curriculum (evolution is a scientific fact versus evolution denies the role of a higher power).

On a broader scale, competing cultural models produce disagreements about how marriage is defined, how masculinity and femininity ought to be performed, and which immigrants are welcome in the United States. When this is the case, dominant cultural models that are informed by systemic inequities privilege some groups of people at the expense of others. In doing so, they give rise to what Adichie (2009) calls "single stories" about people based on race, class, ethnicity, gender, education, family, and so on. According to Gee (2013), humans have historically used such stories for purposes of "control, telling and enforcing [those] that validate their power and sustain it" (p. 35). To accomplish this, they use "the enforcement apparatus of the group or state to keep people from challenging their stories about why the world is as it is and why they and not others should have power and influence in it" (p. 35). It is important to note that Trites (2000) regards YA literature as such an apparatus because it communicates ideologies to adolescent readers and positions them in particular ways. To demonstrate how this might be true, we next examine the relationship between cultural models and literary reading.

Encouraging Students to Ask How Texts Position Them as Readers

Influenced by Chatman's (1978) model of communication, rhetorical criticism conceptualizes narrative transmission as an exchange between various actors (Brewster, 2014). This includes (in part) an actual author, an actual reader, an implied author, and an implied reader. Chatman (1978) acknowledges the existence of a narrator and a narratee as well, but these constructs are not pertinent to our discussion. The "actual author" is the flesh and blood person who writes a text, while the actual reader is the individual who reads it. The implied author and the implied

reader, on the other hand, are social constructs.

The *implied author* refers to the sense we have of an actual author as a result of reading a literary text. Put another way, as we read, we develop a feel for what kind of person the actual author is, what she values, what she knows, and what she regards as just. In this way, the implied author is distinct from the actual author. For example, the actual author of the Hunger Games series is Suzanne Collins. Most readers have never met her, yet they construct a sense of what they imagine she might be like. Having read her novels, readers might conclude that Collins is empathetic to people living in poverty, distrustful of governments, and suspicious of media that she regards as working in concert with the state to distract people from important social justice issues. This sense of Collins that readers construct is the implied author.

Given that they are unlikely to meet the vast majority of people who read their books, authors must also construct a sense of the audience for whom they are writing. Iser (1978) argues that to do so, they draw on a repertoire of literary conventions, genre conventions, historical events, and factual information about the world beyond a text, which they assume their ideal reader will share. For Iser, a text's repertoire consists of "all the familiar territory within the text," including "references to earlier works, or to social and historical norms, or to the whole culture from which the text has emerged" (p. 69). It also includes "elements and, indeed, whole traditions of past literature that are mixed together with these norms" (p. 79). Because authors do not necessarily know who will read their work, they must imagine themselves writing to an "ideal" reader—that is, a reader who "embodies all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect—predispositions laid down, not by an empirical reality, but by the book itself" (p. 34). Iser (1978) refers to this reader as the *implied reader*. Of course, no such reader actually exists. The implied reader is instead a role that literary texts invite actual readers to perform.

Dissatisfied with the concept of the implied reader, Rabinowitz (1987/1998) distinguishes between three audiences readers can potentially join. The first, the *actual audience*, consists of flesh and blood readers. The *authorial audience*, on the other hand, consists of readers whose background knowledge, prejudices, ideologies, values, assumptions, etc. approximate those of the implied author. Put another way, the authorial audience represents the "ideal" audience for whom a given author envisions herself writing. Finally, Rabinowitz argues that readers join the *narrative audience* when they suspend disbelief and accept a work of fiction as "real." As Brewster (2014) explains, "If we did not immerse ourselves in J. K. Rowling's story world, why would we be sad, or maybe even shed real tears, when Dumbledore dies? Yet we also logically understand that our immersion does not make Hogwarts real" (p. 171).

The implied author refers to the sense we have of an actual author . . . what kind of person [she] is, what she values, what she knows, and what she regards as just.

To join the authorial audience, readers must accept, even if temporarily, the author's implied cultural models. In some cases, the actual reader's cultural models may align with those of the implied author. Alternatively, readers might need to set aside their cultural models to join a text's authorial audience. The ethical implications of this are significant: *Joining a text's authorial audience may mean embracing cultural models that marginalize some readers*. Because the high school literature canon has traditionally consisted of works written by predominantly White, male authors (Applebee, 1993), this is presumably an accommodation that females and readers from minoritized backgrounds have historically made. Consider, for example, what the experience of joining the authorial audience for Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* might be like for African American students who experience genuine pain as a result of its use of racist language, even though it is framed as satire. Of course, readers also have the option to resist joining an authorial audience, but their ability to do so is mitigated in school, where grades are often tied to joining authorial audiences.

What are the benefits of encouraging students to acknowledge that adopting the role of the implied reader is to embrace, temporarily or otherwise, a set of cultural models prescribed for us by an implied author? First, doing so invites us to ask, "Who does this text assume that I am?" In turn, we might ask

what cultural models the text invites us to adopt and whether, taken collectively, those cultural models reify or complicate oppressive ideologies represented by the status quo. Additionally, we might ask whether the cultural models are those that we, as members of the actual audience, embrace (or wish to embrace) and what the implications of our doing so might be. This in turn leads us to investigate our own cultural models more closely and to question the extent to which they align with (or contradict) those of the implied author (and hence the authorial audience). In this way, the actual reader is very much at the center of our work.

Often students are reluctant to name racist and sexist cultural models lest they be considered racist and sexist themselves.

In the following section, we describe an activity that challenges students to interrogate the cultural models they encounter in YA texts.

Introducing the Cultural Models Activity to Preservice Teachers

To work toward the goal of preservice teachers considering and interrogating the cultural models implicated within the authorial audience of YA fiction, we first facilitate an activity in which they learn to recognize and name cultural models at work in dominant culture. To facilitate this activity, we use pictures of teens from Bey's (2003) photography exhibit, *The Chicago Project*. Bey photographed portraits of 12 high school students and asked them the questions: "Is it possible for a photographic portrait to reveal anything 'real' about you or someone else? What aspects of yourself are you willing to share with the world, and how do others respond to these self-presentations?" In addition to being photographed, the students were also audio-recorded during an interview. For the exhibit (available online), the teens selected one of Bey's portraits of them, along with an excerpt from the audio interview and transcript that they thought best represented them. We have found these self-selected portraits and interview excerpts to be helpful in considering what cultural models we bring to bear on the portraits and how the audio interviews and transcript excerpts work against the essentialism inherent in those cultural models.

To begin this activity, we explain to preservice teachers that cultural models are at work even when we do not take them up personally. For example, though we may not individually subscribe to cultural models of hyper-masculinity when interacting with young boys, that is not to say that those cultural models do not exist and do not work on boys in problematic ways (Newkirk, 2002). We also have found it helpful at the onset of this activity to allow preservice teachers to distance themselves from the cultural models that are named during the activity. Often students are reluctant to name racist and sexist cultural models lest they be considered racist and sexist themselves. Therefore, we allow our preservice teachers to first attribute the cultural models that are named to dominant culture before we ask them later in the activity to consider their own complicity in perpetuating the cultural models. To signal this attribution to dominant culture, we ask preservice teachers to use the pronoun "they" instead of "I" when naming cultural models that may be brought to bear on the portraits from Bey's (2003) exhibit. Here, "they" voices the dominant culture; preservice teachers use the phrase, "They would say…," to name cultural models that essentialize the students in the portraits.

This first part of the activity involves showing only the portrait of the students depicted in Bey's (2003) exhibit to the preservice teachers and facilitating a discussion of what "they would say" about each of the students. This discussion results in the naming of cultural models that circulate around the students represented in the portraits. For example, preservice teachers name overtly racist, sexist, and homophobic cultural models, and they also name cultural models that are more subtly problematic (e.g., thug, bad student, poor person). Each of these cultural models comes with its own set of assumptions, or "as-ifs," about the way the world works and about how people navigate it. Teasing out the assumptions that accompany cultural models is important for preservice teachers, as it requires them to consider the implications of how these cultural models work on all of us. For example, examining the cultural model of a "poor person" helps us to consider the assumptions made about people "as if" poverty is framed as a result of bad choices as compared to "as if" poverty is a condi-

tion produced by an economic system that people experience. Comparing the cultural model of a "poor person" with the cultural model of a "person experiencing poverty" helps us understand the implications of working from (and with) a given cultural model.

The second part of the activity involves considering the audio recording and transcripts from the excerpted interviews with the students in the portraits. Once the cultural models that dominant culture would bring to bear on the students are named, the interviews can be used to complicate those cultural models. Here, the goal is not to disprove the cultural model by only looking for disconfirming information. Rather, the goal is to seek out information that provides a fuller understanding of the student in ways that the cultural model did not allow. While the cultural model applied to the portraits might essentialize the students, the interview provides information that can broaden our understanding of the students and counter their reduction to a few characteristics offered by the cultural model. Here, Adichie's (2009) reminder is significant; like stereotypes, the cultural models are not necessarily untrue, but they are incomplete. For example, a student who is considered a "thug" may very well be a troublemaker at school, but that does not mean the student's entire existence is defined and explained by that label, especially in the ways it is used by dominant culture. Further, there may be another cultural model that allows for more of that student's humanity to be considered (e.g., adolescent resisting an institution that has historically marginalized him and people like him). This second part of the activity allows preservice teachers to consider the problematic incompleteness of cultural models and the problematic implications of essentializing students "as if" they are and always will be understood only with a narrow set of criteria and assumptions.

Having allowed our students to practice applying the concept of cultural models to Bey's (2003) photographs, we next introduce them to the concept of the implied author. To do so, we explain that an implied author is distinct from a text's actual author. As a social construct, it represents one's overall sense of an author as a result of reading a work of literature. That is, the implied author is a manifestation of the qualities that we, as readers, attribute to the actual author without necessarily having met him or her. As explained, most readers of the Hunger Games series presumably will never meet Suzanne Collins, but as a result of reading her books, they develop a sense of what she might be like as a person and what cultural models she might embrace. Once we have established this concept with preservice teachers, we next spend time working with them to identify cultural models they associate with the implied authors of YA texts they have read for class.

Assured that our preservice teachers grasp the concepts of cultural models and the implied author, we next place them in small groups, each of which receives a sheet of poster board partitioned into four quadrants (see Fig. 1). We ask the preservice teachers to imagine that the protagonist of whatever novel we are reading at the time walks into a room occupied by members of dominant culture. Group members are then asked to answer the question, "What cultural models might the people in that room impose on the protagonist to make sense of him or her?" As the preservice teachers work to answer that question, they record their responses in the upper-left quadrant of the poster board using the sentence stem, "They would say…," with the understanding that "they" refers to readers from the dominant culture. In the lower-left quadrant, students identify the "as-ifs" (or underlying assumptions) on which these cultural models rest. For example, if students argue that dominant culture would construct Katniss Everdeen, the protagonist of Collins's (2008) *The Hunger Games,* as a "tomboy,"

Figure 1. Cultural models activity poster board

they might identify the "as-if" underlying this cultural model as follows: Girls do not typically hunt, fight, or participate in other masculine activities.

Next, the preservice teachers transition to the right side of the poster board where they repeat the same steps, this time identifying cultural models they associate with the implied author and foregrounding the "as-ifs" on which those cultural models are founded. If, for example, preservice teachers argue that the implied author of Collins's (2008) *The Hunger Games* embraces a cultural model that constructs men and women as exhibiting masculine as well as feminine traits, they might express the underlying "as-if" as follows: Gender is not rigidly defined, and healthy individuals exhibit a balance of masculine and feminine qualities. As they complete the cultural models activity, we ask the preservice teachers to work toward answering the questions, "What cultural models do I bring to the text as an actual reader, and is the authorial audience the text constructs one that I wish to join?" To illustrate the kind of critical conversations that are possible when teachers take up this activity in the classroom, we next apply it to two YA novels that are commonly regarded as tackling social justice issues, but which we argue position readers in vastly different ways: S. E. Hinton's (1967/2006) *The Outsiders* and Matt de la Peña's (2009) *We Were Here*.

What cultural models do I bring to the text as an actual reader, and is the authorial audience the text constructs one that I wish to join?

Complicating the Myth of Rugged Individualism in *The Outsiders*

In *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967/2006), the narrator, Ponyboy Curtis, and his older brothers, Darry and Sodapop, self-identify as "Greasers," a term that, in the story world Hinton constructs, refers to teenagers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds that mainstream society constructs as "delinquents." Socials (or Socs), on the other hand, come from middle- to upper-class backgrounds. Unlike Greasers, Socs are popular in school, have access to material comforts, and generally escape punishment for drinking and fighting as a result of their social status and privilege. Throughout Hinton's novel, Greasers and Socs repeatedly come into conflict with each other. By forging friendships, however, characters such as Ponyboy, Cherry Valance, and Randy gradually come to appreciate their shared humanity. Indeed, a recurring ideological statement that Ponyboy and Cherry articulate in the novel encourages readers to acknowledge that "things are rough all over" (p. 35), regardless of one's social class.

Our preservice teachers identify a range of cultural models they believe readers from dominant culture might impose on the Curtis brothers and their Greaser friends. For example, they assume that "they" would say:

- The Curtis brothers are more responsible than most of their friends. They work or attend school, and they want to improve their situation in life. In contrast, Greasers are generally lazy and irresponsible.
- Ponyboy will probably earn a college scholarship because he's smart, responsible, and takes school seriously. Most Greasers, on the other hand, put little effort into school and will either drop out or go to prison.
- Ponyboy and his brothers will one day move into a "better" neighborhood. Ponyboy earns good grades in school, and Darry is a hard worker who wants to better himself. Most Greasers do not see the value of hard work and don't show respect for authority. As a result, they will likely continue the cycle of poverty.

The above dominant cultural model is founded on middle-class ideologies and values. As we interrogate it with preservice teachers, we discover that it is premised on the following "as-if": so long as people work hard and take advantage of the opportunities given them, they can improve their situation in life. It is not difficult to recognize the ideological parallels between this "as if" and the American Dream. Both perpetuate a myth of rugged individualism—that is, they assume that, in the United States, hard work and discipline are necessary and sufficient for upward mobility.

We read *The Outsiders* as perpetuating this dominant cultural model, which (alarmingly) holds people in poverty accountable for their situation. From the outset of the novel, Ponyboy, in the role of narrator,

distinguishes himself and his brothers as "different" from other Greasers. He earns "good grades and [has] a high IQ" (p. 4), whereas friends such as Two-Bit "never learned anything" in school and "just went for kicks" (p. 10). Ponyboy also marks the Curtis brothers as exceptional as a result of their embracing a set of ethics that stands in opposition to most Greasers': "Greasers are almost like hoods; we steal things and drive old souped-up cars and hold up gas stations and have a gang fight once in a while. I don't mean I do things like that. Darry would kill me if I got into trouble with the police" (p. 3). Perhaps this is why Ponyboy holds his friends accountable for much of the trouble they face, as is evident when he tells readers that Dallas "deserves everything he gets" while Two-Bit "doesn't really want or need half the things he swipes from stores" (p. 16). In this way, the novel's implied author subtly shifts responsibility for the hardships characters experience away from social institutions, placing it instead on individuals.

Throughout *The Outsiders*, the implied author depicts the class system in the United States as something that neither Socs nor Greasers can change. Instead, it is a natural inevitability. Prior to a climactic rumble between the two groups, Randy, a Soc, instructs Ponyboy, "You can't win, even if you whip us. You'll still be where you were before—at the bottom. And we'll still be the lucky ones with all the breaks . . . . Greasers will still be greasers and Socs will still be Socs" (p. 117). Politically minded readers are unlikely to encounter solutions for dealing with class-related issues in Hinton's novel other than to learn that, economic disparities notwithstanding, people share a common sameness ("things are rough all over").

When one examines the text's surface ideology (Hollindale, 1988), the implied author of *The Outsiders* appears to critique an entrenched class system that oppresses some people at the expense of others. As one interrogates the cultural models at work in the text, however, it becomes increasingly apparent that the implied author seems to regard the path to economic prosperity as requiring passage through that same oppressive class system. For example, we read the novel as suggesting that upward mobility is possible for those who are willing to "play ball" and work within the system. Describing his older brother Darry, for example, Ponyboy states:

> He wasn't going to be any hood when he got old. He was going to get somewhere. Living the way we do would only make him more determined to get somewhere. *That's why he's better than the rest of us*, I thought. He's going somewhere. And I was going to be like him. I wasn't going to live in a lousy neighborhood all my life. (p. 138, emphasis added)

At the end of the novel, Ponyboy, having conceded that the class system poses "too vast a problem to be just a personal thing," takes it upon himself to tell his friends' stories in hopes that "maybe people would understand then and wouldn't be so quick to judge a boy by the amount of hair oil he wore" (p. 179). Not coincidentally, he seizes on an essay assignment for his English class as an opportunity to do so, suggesting that he regards education as offering him an escape from poverty. Other characters reinforce the latter cultural model, including Ponyboy's brothers, who continually remind him, "[W]ith your brains and grades you could get a scholarship, and we could put you through college" (p. 173). In contrast, the most marginalized characters in the novel—Johnny and Dallas—are killed. Likewise, Ponyboy tells the reader that "Tim Shepard and Curly Shepard and the Brumly boys and the other guys [he] knew would die [violently as well] someday" (p. 154). Things might be "rough all over," but the implied author of *The Outsiders* embraces (and invites her implied audience to embrace) a cultural model that regards economic prosperity as possible for those willing to embrace middle-class values and ideologies.

[I]t becomes increasingly apparent that the implied author seems to regard the path to economic prosperity as requiring passage through that same oppressive class system.

With this in mind, we confront the following questions: "What cultural models do I bring to the text as an actual reader, and is the authorial audience the text constructs one that I wish to join?" The cultural model that we have attributed to dominant culture and the implied author of *The Outsiders* strikes us as particularly insidious because it shifts responsibility for class inequities away from social systems and institutions, placing it instead on individuals. If

the "as if" underlying this particular cultural model regards poverty as a result of laziness and squandered opportunities, then the consequences are that we, as readers, have less empathy for people experiencing poverty. Characters such as Dallas and Johnny are considered disposable because we care less for them. In contrast, we have a bit more empathy for the Curtis brothers because they are trying to overcome their situation. Finally, we celebrate Ponyboy because he "picks himself up by the bootstraps," serving as an example for other poor people. In this way, *The Outsiders* strikes us as perpetuating a single story (Adichie, 2009) about poverty in the United States, thereby reifying the very class system that Hinton ostensibly sought to critique.

As we interrogate this cultural model, we discover that it is premised on the following "as-if": To be American is to be White, speak English, and adhere to laws.

Complicating Cultural Models about Race in *We Were Here*

Published 42 years after *The Outsiders*, *We Were Here* (de la Peña, 2009) also focuses on socially marginalized characters. Yet unlike Hinton's (1967/2006) novel, which features all White characters, de la Peña's novel captures the racial and ethnic diversity of contemporary American society. When Miguel Castañeda, the novel's Mexican American narrator, is sentenced to a group home for an act he is unwilling to talk about, he embarks on a physical and existential journey that leads him to question the meaning of life. After arriving at the group home, Miguel is introduced to Mong, a Chinese American teenager facing an existential dilemma of his own, and Rondell, an African American teenager who spent the majority of his life as a ward of the state. The boys decide to escape the home together and set course for Mexico where they hope to put their respective pasts behind them.

The cultural model that our preservice teachers typically suggest dominant culture would impose on the characters in de la Peña's novel is one that emphasizes their status as minoritized youth. Students argue, for example, that "they" would say:

- Miguel probably doesn't speak English, at least not well.
- Mong, Rondell, and Miguel are "thugs" who probably deserve to be in jail.
- Miguel is probably in the United States illegally.
- Miguel and Rondell probably come from single-parent families.
- Miguel isn't American.

As we interrogate this cultural model, we discover that it is premised on the following "as-if": To be American is to be White, speak English, and adhere to laws.

As students revisit de la Peña's novel, they discover that it complicates the aforementioned cultural model in several ways. For example, although Miguel self-identifies as Mexican American, he is, in fact, biracial. His father, the son of a Mexican immigrant, was born in the United States (and died serving in the military), as was his mother, who is White. Indeed, a central tension in the novel arises as a result of Miguel's inability to reconcile himself with his Mexican heritage. Unlike his mother, whose "skin was so much whiter than [his] and [whose] eyes were big and blue" (p. 2), Miguel's skin is brown, and his appearance distinguishes him as Mexican. In the presence of other Mexicans, however, Miguel feels like an outsider. He does not speak Spanish; as a result, he is unable to communicate with his grandfather, who operates a landscaping business in California. Worse, Miguel suspects that his grandfather does not regard him or his older brother, Diego, as "real" Mexicans. Recounting an occasion when he and Diego visited their grandparents and worked alongside their grandfather and other Mexican laborers harvesting produce, a job that Miguel found physically taxing, he states:

> And all Gramps did was laugh the whole time. He told us in Spanish that we were tired 'cause we weren't real Mexicans like everyone else who was out there picking in his group. We were Americans. Told us we might be dark on the outside, but inside we were white like a couple blond boys from Hollywood. (p. 10)

Still later, Miguel wonders whether his grandfather will ever be capable of seeing him as anything other than a "blond boy from Beverly Hills with no heart" (p. 327).

Describing their experience reading *We Were Here*, the preservice teachers with whom we work

often express surprise at de la Peña's decision early in the novel to reinforce dominant cultural models about race. Upon arriving at the group home, Miguel observes that the director's "[b]lond floppy hair, blue eyes and perfect white teeth" cause him to "[look] pretty damn out of place, considering all the Black and Mexican ex-Juvi kids he was supposed to be watching" (p. 15). Likewise, Miguel measures Mong against the "Asian kids in my school back in Stockton" who "barely even talked" and who "just sat there at the front of the class and took notes and got As on all the math tests" (p. 22). At one point, Miguel even perpetuates a racist stereotype by describing Rondell as a "retarded ape" (p. 7). As they complete the cultural models activity, however, the preservice teachers come to appreciate that the implied author introduces these dominant cultural models only to complicate them.

Throughout *We Were Here*, Miguel is acutely aware of the labels others impose on him, and he bridles at the inability of those labels to capture his complexity as a subject. When Rondell nicknames him Mexico, Miguel angrily exclaims, "First of all, man, I'm only *half* Mexican. My mom's white. Second of all, I was born in Stockton, California. *America*. Not Mexico. And third, I don't even speak Spanish" (p. 55, emphasis in original). He also rejects the reductive labels that authorities in the judicial and social welfare systems impose on him. He angrily tells the director of the group home, "You open up their stupid-ass files and act like it has all the answers about 'em . . . . But you don't know me, man. You don't know the first thing about who I am or where I come from" (p. 46). Later, after he shreds his file and symbolically buries Mong's and Rondell's in the sand alongside the Pacific Ocean, Miguel reflects:

> But even so, I decided something sitting there: me, Mong and Rondell might be temporary, but while we were here we were more than just what some file could say. We were real people too, just the same as anybody else who was alive. If somebody wanted to know about us they should meet us face to face instead of just relying on typed words. (p. 138)

Following his epiphany, Miguel sets about writing in his journal, an act that illustrates his desire to regain control over his story and define himself on his terms.

The idea that cultural models are socially constructed is perhaps most clearly highlighted in a scene that takes place after Miguel and Rondell arrive at the border that divides the United States and Mexico. References to borders abound in the scene. As they wait to cross into Mexico, Miguel is taken by the image of White tourists returning "back to America. Back to where it was clean and safe and their houses waited for them on quiet streets with locked doors" (p. 217). Watching them, he states, "Sometimes they'd roll down their window, pull in something colorful, place crisp American bills into brown hands and then roll their window back up" (p. 217). In contrast, the world on the opposite side of the border is made up of "brown people living brown lives in a brown place who made bright colors to sell to America" (p. 217).

[T]he preservice teachers . . . often express surprise at de la Peña's decision early in the novel to reinforce dominant cultural models about race.

As Miguel contemplates this scene, he captures the gaze of a Mexican boy on the opposite side of the fence, a teenager like himself, selling decorative ceramic suns to White tourists returning to America. In that moment, Miguel recognizes a part of himself in his Mexican counterpart, leading him to gain greater clarity:

> For the first time. I was Mexican. Like him. Like my pop and my gramps and all the people me and Diego picked berries with that day in the fields of Fresno. Me. Miguel Castañeda. I was the same as this kid selling suns. We were both tall and young and skinny. We both had short brown hair and bony elbows and the ability to stare without blinking. (p. 218)

Recognition of their commonness leads Miguel to experience a moment of cognitive dissonance, and he wonders:

> How'd it happen like this? If our country's really so much better than Mexico, like everybody says—'cause we got more money and better schools and better hospitals and less people get sick just by drinking the water—then why should I be here and not him? Why was I on the better side of this big-ass fence? Just 'cause my moms is white? 'cause of the story my pop always told me, how gramps snuck through a sewage drain, crawled in everybody's piss and shit, just to make it to America? But that's nothing to do with me.
>
> What did *I* do?
>
> And what did this kid selling clay suns *not* do? (p. 218, emphasis in original)

Miguel subsequently accepts that any perceived differences between Mexicans and Americans are attributable to "what side of a fence you were born on. And the fact that I was on the better side made me feel sick to my stomach" (p. 218). In this way, de la Peña, like Hinton (1967/2006), acknowledges that "things are rough all over." Yet whereas the implied author of *The Outsiders* holds individuals accountable for their situation in life, the implied author of *We Were Here* acknowledges the damage that institutions inflict on people as a result of socially constructed distinctions made about race and class.

Categories such as race, class, and nationality are socially constructed, but the violence they inflict on people is real.

Again, we are led to investigate the "as-ifs" underlying this cultural model with the intention of answering the following questions: "What cultural models do I bring to the text as an actual reader, and is the authorial audience the text constructs one that I wish to join?" For us, the cultural model we attribute to the implied author of *We Were Here* is founded on an "as-if" that can be expressed as follows: Categories such as race, class, and nationality are socially constructed, but the violence they inflict on people is real. Unlike *The Outsiders*, which holds individuals responsible for their poverty, de la Peña's (2009) novel calls readers' attention to the role that systems and institutions play in perpetuating racism and economic disparities. As readers, we empathize with Miguel, Mong, and Rondell not simply because we recognize them as complex characters, but because we respect their struggle to define themselves in the face of labels that powerful institutions such as the judicial system, education system, and social welfare system impose on them. Likewise, when the characters etch their names in a boulder alongside the ocean, we interpret their doing so as an attempt to assert their identities over a world that renders them invisible. In this way, we read *We Were Here* as challenging single stories about people based on race, class, and nationalism and as advancing an ethos of empathy and compassion that we hope our preservice teachers will embrace.

Coda: Asking Troubling Questions of Literary Texts

When we ask preservice teachers to interrogate the cultural models they encounter in YA literature, we also invite them to reflect on the role that cultural models play in their lives. We were reminded of this recently when, a few weeks after introducing the cultural models activity in class, one of us (Sean) asked undergraduate English majors in a course he teaches on YA literature and literary theory how many of them would self-identify as feminists. Two students, both female, indicated that they would, which prompted Sean to ask why the remainder did not. The answer? The vast majority of the students regarded feminists as angry militants who belittle men and take the fight for gender equality to unnecessary extremes. Asked where they acquired this perception, the students were unable to point to a single source, though several of them credited the media with perpetuating this cultural model. Serendipitously, Ryan's students were having similar conversations in protest of a Men's Rights group that was founded on this cultural model of feminism and that hosted a conference on their campus to denounce feminism and advocate in opposition for men's rights.

As Sean and his students explored the issue more fully, some students observed that men often control major media outlets, which led them to wonder how perpetuating this stereotype, even if inadvertently, might further their interests. Building on this insight, other students asked whether women oppress themselves when they accept a single story about feminism that is perpetuated by men and that results in their rejecting a social movement that is intended to safeguard their own interests. As one student stated, "It's pretty powerful to think that the media could persuade women to embrace a cultural model that actually oppresses them." Powerful, indeed.

Sean may not have won any new recruits to the feminist cause, but he left class satisfied that his students had begun to ask how the cultural models they embrace shape their perceptions of other people and the world. In subsequent classes, students initiated discussions in which they considered how competing cultural models account for disagreements about what is "appropriate" for adolescents to read, as well

as how they are implicated in single stories about adolescence as a time of crisis and uncertainty (Lesko, 2012).

Hollindale (1988) distinguishes between a text's surface ideology, where authors communicate their beliefs and values directly to readers through explicit ideological statements (pp. 10–11), and passive ideology, which he attributes to an author's unexamined assumptions (p. 12). For Hollindale, "A large part of any book is written not by its author but by the world its author lives in" (p. 15). The same can be said of reading. Encouraging students, whether in teacher education programs or secondary English classes, to focus only on the surface ideologies they encounter in texts is not sufficient. Rather, if our goal is to produce active readers who are capable of critiquing oppressive cultural models, we must also ask students to consider how the texts they read position them and how the world they live in influences the meanings they construct in their transactions with literature.

In conclusion, we offer a list of guiding questions that we posed throughout the article and that we suggest instructors of preservice teachers or secondary students use to frame the activities we described. These include:

Interrogating the cultural models at work in texts

- What cultural models does the implied author present in the text?
- How and to what extent does the implied author reify and/or critique the cultural models in the text?
- How and to what extent does the implied author invite the reader to take up and/or critique the cultural models in the text?

Interrogating the cultural models readers bring to texts

- Who does this text assume I am?
- What cultural models do I bring to the text?
- How and to what extent do the cultural models I bring to the text align and/or conflict with the cultural models presented and/or critiqued by the implied author?
- What are the social and political implications of the reification and/or critique of the cultural models at work in the text?

Ultimately, our main concern is the extent to which readers are unintentionally marginalized from the institution of school and the pleasure of reading because they are not taking up and/or actively resisting the requisite cultural models validated by school-sanctioned readings of literary texts. Additionally, we are concerned about the extent to which literary texts are uncritically used as vehicles for exacerbating problematic cultural models that maintain the status quo.

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