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“Rewriting the Rules:” Postcolonial Perspectives on Contemporary Young Adult Literature

Ryan Moore, Augsburg University

Introduction

Literature has long been the foundation of the English Language Arts (ELA) classroom. It is through the reading and exploration of literature that ELA teachers and their students achieve learning objectives and course standards; additionally, it should be a goal of every ELA teacher to present students with literature that they will find engaging, challenging, and enjoyable. When the importance of literature to the ELA classroom is fully considered, it is logical to assume great care should go into the selection of the texts used. There seems, however, to be a tendency for schools to lean back on the same canon of texts that has been used for decades.

If the goal of reading in the ELA class really is to engage students with texts, then the demographics of both classrooms and our world needs to be considered. Diversity of all kinds—racial, gender, socioeconomic class, and sexual orientation to name a few—is a part of our world that we cannot neglect to acknowledge in our schools. Additionally, it seems that we forget that students all over the world share the commonality of being youths attempting to navigate and learn about the world around them. It would seem,

then, that we should consider literature that serves both of these ideas.

This research works toward addressing this growing need within the ELA classroom. Using a framework of postcolonial literary analysis, this study analyzes the protagonists from a selection of acclaimed, diverse, young adult literature as they navigate the complexity of their identities. This study chooses to focus on diverse literature because of the growing call for diversity in curricula; the focus on young adult literature is because it is my belief—backed by the literature of the field—that this is an underutilized genre that students will find impactful. This research seeks to evaluate contemporary literature that might contribute to best building a culturally relevant literature curriculum for secondary classrooms. It is my hope that this study will serve as a resource to educators available literature in search of works that will be helpful in their own classrooms. It will be shown that, using a framework of postcolonial literary theory, contemporary diverse YAL yields complex readings that allow readers to reconsider the identity quest of diverse protagonists and the rules that exist within both the YA genre and society as a whole.

Literature Review

An easily observable binary exists within the literature used in American classrooms. This binary is between the canonical classics and young adult literature (YAL). Buehler (2016) highlights the existence of this binary and tells readers the negative consequences it creates for young readers. When we treat YAL as being different—frequently lesser—than other genres of literature, young readers get the notion that reading for pleasure and reading to be intellectually stimulated never overlap (Buehler, 2016). This, naturally, stems from a discrepancy in the field regarding the use and selection of YAL.

Gibbons et al. (2006) surveyed 142 English language arts teachers from 72 different secondary schools around the country about their use of YAL. From the results of their survey, the authors arrived at a few themes pertaining to the use of YAL in classrooms. The first theme “was the belief [among educators] that young adult literature lacks sophistication and literary merit.” Much of this worry was tied to the idea that YAL was not complex enough to help teachers meet standards and objectives (Gibbons et al., 2006). The authors of the article, however, argued that this was not the case; YAL is a complex genre to be used by teachers (Malo-Juvera, 2017; Alsup, 2003; Miller, 2005; Brooks and Cueto, 2018; and Groenke, Maples, and Henderson, 2010). Articles by these authors show that complex readings can be derived from Young Adult (YA) texts; some of these articles, in fact, are set in a classroom context. This theme from the survey illustrates Buehler’s

idea that a binary exists around the selection of classroom literature. This survey also concluded that YAL is relatable to students’ interests (Gibbons et al., 2006). When interest is peaked, the motivation to read and be engaged will also increase.

Obviously, the idea of text complexity cannot be overlooked when selecting a text. Jiménez and McIlhagga (2013) mention that the Common Core State Standards recommend the Lexile score for text complexity; however, Lexile is calculated using things like word frequency, sentence length, and vocabulary. Because of some of the shortcomings of Lexile, Buehler (2016) developed her own qualitative method for determining text complexity. With this method, text complexity is broken down into two categories, Complexity of Style and Complexity of Substance. Within the Style category is language, structure, and stylistic elements such as design and punctuation; Complexity of Substance considers characters, setting, literary devices, topics and themes, and overall coherence of the book (Buehler, 2016). As any reader can understand, some books are better than others, so quality and complexity of a text should be taken into account when considering texts.

Jiménez and McIlhagga (2013) mention the importance of selecting texts students will be motivated to read. Much of the rationale behind using YAL with young readers is an increased motivation to read this genre that is targeted at them. This stems from the idea that YAL is developmentally appropriate in both style and content for young readers. It is also noted that a visual aspect to literature can be really



beneficial for developing readers, even though it is often frequently overlooked. (Jiménez and McIlhagga, 2013). With graphic novels such as *American Born Chinese* by Yang and *March* by Lewis, Aydin, and Powell, appearing on the Printz Award list, the visual aspect of YAL is being noticed in the field (American Library Association, 2018).

When we consider the fact that YAL can increase students' motivation to read and the fact that it is developmentally appropriate literature for young readers, the ELA classroom takes on a student-centered approach when it comes to text selection. Kaplan (2007) sees that YAL may be used "to inspire, and perhaps, change the lives of young people." Bueller (2016) saw this with her own life: "While I didn't love every YA book I read as a teen, I recognized that young adult authors were drawing me out of my own life and into the larger world. They were helping me think about who I was and who I wanted—and didn't want—to become." Within the realm of YAL, there is literature that is relevant to all readers.

The growing diversity in schools must also be considered when selecting texts in order to create a culturally relevant curriculum. One of the early works that makes the stand in support of diverse literature that still echoes in scholarship today is "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors" by Bishop in 1990. Literature can act as a window for readers to view worlds and perspectives that are not their own, doors for readers "to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author," or mirrors for readers to see reflections of their own "lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience."

(Bishop, 1990). Bishop (1990) goes on to explain that we are underserving all students when we deprive them of literature that represents a variety of world experiences; this means we need diverse literature. Kaplan (2007) claims that YAL has the capabilities to reflect changing societal norms in ways other genres of literature cannot: "And the third strand [seen in YAL] is the changing face of young adult literature and how its reflective nature mirrors societal norms and expectations." Included in this is the importance of cultural relevance Bishop (1990) calls for. When all of this is considered, YAL—and specifically diverse YAL—provides students with the opportunities to explore relevant content from a youth perspective.

Classroom use has shown that intellectually stimulating content lies within YAL. Alsup (2003) shares success seen with reading *Speak*, a YA text by Anderson, with high school readers. "Many of these books address difficult or explosive issues that, whether we like it or not, are real in students' lives" (Alsup, 2003). *Speak* is predominantly focused on the rape of a young girl; with 2018 being the era of the #MeToo movement, it seems that conversations around consent and the horrors of sexual violence are as important as ever. Alsup discusses the fact that *Speak* can be used as a vehicle for young people to have difficult conversations they may not be able to have without a text to provide structure (2003). The theme of difficult conversations through YAL continues as Miller writes about using the YA book *Shattering Glass*, by Giles, in an AP Literature and Composition class to talk about violence. Miller's

students shared how stereotyping and perception “led to different types of harassment and even bullying at school” (2005); it is not a stretch to assume that students at school’s all over the nation have observed the same things.

Groenke, Maples, and Henderson (2010) continue the scholarship on the value of reading diverse YAL, as they use three different pieces of YAL to show how it can be used in the classroom to talk about difficult issues. Most notably, it is shown how Myer’s *Monster* can be used to make readers think about racism and crime in America. This is not the only example of *Monster* being used in a classroom: “In terms of the curriculum, students demonstrated a higher level of thinking and connected to multiple pieces of text as they approached various opportunities to participate in inquiry, discussion, and research” (Seglem and Bonner, 2016).

Wolk (2009) makes the case that YAL has practical uses for teaching about topics that are crucial for young readers to understand as citizens of the nation and world. “Teaching for social responsibility means being honest about our problems and injustices, and literature can help us to confront these truths” (Wolk, 2009). He uses *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, by Alexie, as an example of a YA novel that could be used to teach about social justice. Using Yang’s *American Born Chinese*, readers can engage in conversations of multiculturalism and cultural identity (Wolk, 2009). Baer and Glasgow (2010) zero in on Muslim cultural identity as they highlight six examples of Muslim Young Adult Literature. Critical Race Theory (CRT)

is used as the backbone for their analysis and use of these texts (Baer and Glasgow, 2010). In addition to showing how examples of diverse literature can be used, Baer and Glasgow (2010) show the value in involving literary theory in the reading of a text. A variety of work coming from a classroom context shows that diverse YAL and other YA texts allow students to engage in important content such as violence, racism, diversity, and cultural identity.

It is the job of the ELA teacher to provide students with texts that they will find engaging. “Young adult literature seems to have special potential to help students understand their tumultuous time of life” (Alsup, 2003). When we consider the fact that success that has been seen with using YAL in the classroom and the fact that students may be more motivated to read it, YAL seems to be a good candidate for classroom use. Students benefit from reading multicultural literature by having their world view broadened, finding an understanding of prejudice, and seeing themselves in literature (Landt, 2006). Diverse YAL especially achieves this in addition to providing students who have not had the opportunity to seem themselves with mirrors and windows for other students to view life from different perspectives.

Methods

The methodology for this research can be divided into two sections. First, there is the framework of postcolonial theory that was developed to analyze the YAL used in this study. Using literary theory helps to create a common lens for analyzing multiple works of



literature, and postcolonial theory was determined to be the best theory for this research. Second, is the process used to select the texts that act as the data for this study and how the findings are communicated.

Postcolonial Framework

With its ability to be traced back to the twentieth century works of Franz Fanon, Edward Said, and Homi Bhabha, postcolonial theory has grown into a very complex field of literary and cultural studies. Postcolonial theory, in terms of literature, reads texts considering colonialism, oppressive power structures, and the lasting effects of colonialism. It seems that this leads to the possibility of dividing postcolonial theory into macro and micro subdivisions. With the macro portion focusing on the postcolonial existence of cultures, nations, and peoples and the micro putting emphasis on individuals' postcolonial identities. For the sake of this research, focus will be put on the development and search for the postcolonial identities of the protagonists of the literature read. Additionally, this research bases its postcolonial framework on two primary ideas. They are 1. the exploration of the space found within the Otherer/Othered binary—also known as hybridity; and, 2. to use the words of Dimitriadis and McCarthy, “the self is embedded in the communal” (2001).

The Otherer/Othered binary has direct ties to the colonialism that gave birth to postcolonialism as a school of thought. This binary can be rephrased to be between the colonizer and the colonized; this puts further emphasis on

the explicit colonization found in many canonical postcolonial texts such as Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Additionally, the oppressor/oppressed. Phrasing the concept as being of an oppressor and oppressed helps to modernize the ideas of postcolonial theory to be beneficial in a world where imperialism is not explicitly present; although, through postcolonial theory, it is obvious the effects of colonization persist.

The concepts that feed the Otherer/Othered binary must also be explored. The term “Othering” has come to be used by many in postcolonial theory including Ashcroft et al. (2002) and Malo-Juvera (2017). In colonialism, Othering is the intentional marginalization of the colonized. It is through Othering—and, as a result, the creation of the Otherer/Othered binary—that the oppressor/oppressed and colonizer/colonized concepts were born. Drawing on the work of Ashcroft and Spivak, Malo-Juvera (2017) explains that Othering takes place through Worlding and Debasement. Worlding is the perpetuation of differences between the Otherer and the Othered. Debasement is the projection of “negative cultural aspects” upon the Othered in order to marginalize them (Malo-Juvera 2017).

To observe the consequences of Othering, we turn back to the macro and micro distinction of postcolonialism. On the macro scale, Othering leads to “the demise of other forms and possibilities, it involves the active suppression and/or annihilation of forms of ‘Otherness’” (Ashcroft et al, 2002). The death of indigenous languages and cultures is an example of the consequences of Othering. The

micro level of postcolonialism forces us to ask how these macro consequences of Othering affect individuals. Within individuals, there is frequently an internalized feeling of themselves as Other, or the feeling that their Otherness is being imposed upon them. This may result in a clouded concept of identity.

These ideas also lend themselves to the concept of hybridity. Hybridity is the radical encounter of the “self” and the “other.” The complex idea extends beyond the mixing of races or the blending of cultures (Dimitriadis and McCarthy, 2001). In a way, hybridity can be seen when the plurality of one’s identity makes it seem as if they inhabit two (or more) identities at the same time. In a postcolonial context, this is an individual living with their colonial identity as the Other (which is frequently imposed upon them through Othering); however, the search for self-actualization and a more complete self-concept cannot be ignored. In a societal context, hybridity creates “a crisis within the social fabric,” as the Othered work to stake claim to the fact that their identities are more than simply that of the colonized (Ghandi, 1998). A similar crisis takes place within the individual. An understanding of hybridity is key to understanding the oppressor/oppressed binary because it shows that it is not simply a one-or-the-other concept; hybridity shows us that there is space—space that people inhabit—within this binary. In fact, in addition to being rephrased as colonizer/colonized, the oppressor/oppressed binary can manifest as a self/other binary. Many postcolonial novels will show characters exploring the hybridity within their own identities. It is through this exploration

of hybridity where the integrated self is found; this integrated self is the realization of one’s postcolonial identity. However, hybridity does not exist in a vacuum; it hinges upon interaction with a community. Thus, hybridity is the link between the two key postcolonial concepts, Othering and the self in the communal.

The self in the communal relates to how the individual, through the search for their identity, is situated in relation to a larger community. The communal can range from a single individual to a community to an entire nation. In the words of Dimitriadis and McCarthy, “There is always an effort to link individual will and fortune to collective possibility” (2001). There seems to be an assumption, especially within the world of YAL, that the communal will be innately positive and healthy; the fact that individuals may find a sort of negative or unhealthy community to be a part of cannot be overlooked. Therefore, an individual’s postcolonial identity is more than one’s own exploration of hybridity, but how an understanding of these identities allows one to fit within some sort of collective. It must also be recognized that the relationship between the self and the community is transactional and not one dimensional. An understanding of one’s hybridity and identity influences the community they will find themselves a part of, but the community will, in turn, have an influence on one’s understanding of identity.

While this community can be something present and concrete, history is key to the postcolonial communal. Those who have been marginalized have long had a complicated relationship



with history. Appleman (2015) prefaces her chapter on postcolonial theory with the African proverb “Until lions have their own historians, tales of hunting will always glorify the hunter” (p. 86). The relation to postcolonialism is obvious; history is told by the mainstream culture—the colonizers. So, in postcolonial literature, authors and characters struggle with “transmuting time into space.” They seek to make sense of, reconcile, and honor the past in order to “construct a future” (Ashcroft et al. 2002). Through Toni Morrison’s work, it has been shown that the postcolonial author looks to recreate and honor history “as a resource for new and unpredictable futures” (Dimitriadis and McCarthy 2001). In this sense, then, history must be taken into consideration with the communal and become a resource that YAL protagonists utilize to understand themselves and imagine their futures.

Given its attention to history, it is important to note that postcolonial literature may be situated within one of three different historical contexts. First, there is the actual era of colonialism. These works of literature are typically set in a time period where Othering was at its most systematic and oppressive; the era of de jure Othering is a way of looking at it. Works in this period will focus on the revisionist history aspect of postcolonialism’s relationship with history. This both rewrites history to include absented narratives and to provide a perspective on history that comes from the Othered and not the Otherer. Following this is the era where a struggle for independence takes place. Here, those viewed as Other—no longer wishing to be observed merely as the

Other—assert themselves in order to gain independence. In an American context, the Civil Rights Movement can be looked at as a struggle for independence era of postcolonialism. Finally, this leads to the actual era of post-colonialism. The distinction of post-colonialism versus postcolonialism is key, as postcolonialism refers to the school of thought containing postcolonial literary theory being used for this research. Post-colonial is the actual historical period literally meaning after colonialism. The post-colonial era is marked by the end of de jure Othering; however, it is not difficult to guess that a sort of de facto Othering continues to exist in the aftermath of colonialism.

There is also a close relationship between history and language in many postcolonial texts. Being it is the way we communicate with those around us, language and voice are crucial to the self in the communal. In colonialism, “Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of ‘truth’, ‘order’, and ‘reality’ become established.” Received Standard English is asserted as the norm and any other form of language becomes marginalized (Ashcroft et al. 2002). The same holds true for peoples colonized by a language other than English. One form of language is mainstreamed, and all other languages, dialects, or accents become Othered. In terms of identity, one must determine how their language and voice can be used, either positively or negatively, within some sort of communal.

In postcolonial literature,

we see protagonists searching for an understanding of their own identities. To do this, these characters look at their own hybridity and the way they fit the space of the Otherer/Othered binary. They also consider the idea that they are a part of some greater communal. This communal accounts for the history and ancestry of the characters and the language used by them, around them, and towards them. This exploration of identity is integral to a postcolonial reading of a text, as well as an integral component of YAL.

Other scholarly work has shown that YAL can be read with a postcolonial framework Brooks and Cueto (2018) and also Malo-Juvera (2017) focus their work on the actual texts themselves. Brooks and Cueto focus on three novels focusing specifically on the African diaspora; they talk about the value for readers to read multicultural literature. Each of the three texts, Booth's *Kendra*, Brew-Hammond's *Powder Necklace*, and Joseph's *Flowers in the Sky*, are analyzed using both postcolonial and youth lenses (Brooks and Cueto, 2018). This illustrates that YA books can be read with postcolonial literary theory in mind. By doing this, Brooks and Cueto (2018) identified a key theme—which they called “(be)coming home”—that appeared through the analysis of each novel. What is particularly useful about this work is how it analyzes each novel individually, but they are still put in conversation with each other through the frames of literary analysis used.

Malo-Juvera (2017) also analyzes three multicultural YA novels using a postcolonial lens. He uses Sherman's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Yang's *American*

Born Chinese, and De la Pena's *Mexican WhiteBoy*. Both Sherman's and Yang's books were also used for this research. Similar to Brooks and Cueto, Malo-Juvera identifies consistencies across the texts analyzed because of the postcolonial lens used. Malo-Juvera makes use of the work of Ashcroft, Spivak, and others to show Othering, fetishizing the Other, going native, and a comprador class across the three texts. Using this sample of texts, Malo-Juvera is able to show that there is a postcolonial subgenre in the world of YAL, and its thematic complexity makes such texts rich resources for investigation.

Selecting Texts and Communicating Findings

The American Library Association's (ALA) annual Printz Award winners and honor books for young adult literature act as the primary source of texts for this study. The Printz Awards were used because recognition from the ALA points to the idea that a text possesses literary merit. Starting in 2000, using the Printz Awards allowed focus to be placed upon contemporary literature; this is a reflection of the belief that there is an untapped well of contemporary literature available for classroom use. Additionally, receiving the award or being named an honor book potentially increases the chances of a book gaining popularity and ending up in school libraries or classrooms. Online summaries were read of books on the Printz Award list to look for works that seemed to be about diverse protagonists and their identities; from there, a sample of texts were chosen for the research. Not every book that was



deemed a potential candidate for the postcolonial reading of the research was necessarily selected for the final reading list; the time constraints of the study dictated the number of book that would be read.

In total, fourteen books were read for this research. Nine books that were either Printz Award winners or honor books were included; this consists of five award winners and four honor books. The two prequels for 2017 winner *March*, by Lewis, Aydin, and Powell, were read to develop a better understanding for the narrative. Three books that are not from the Printz Awards were also used for this study. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, by Sherman Alexie, was used because of its recognition with the National Book Award, to add a work centering around the Native American perspective to the research, and because it is already becoming a commonly taught YA text within schools. The two graphic novels making up *Persepolis*, by Marjane Satrapi, were selected to add more global representation to the research.

From there, every text was read and analyzed through the common lens of the framework previously explained. Primary focus was put on the analysis of developing postcolonial identities of the characters within the literature read. A brief rationale for each text was written and has placed in an Appendix in order to provide some information about each text studied.

Following the reading of the individual texts, major themes and patterns were extrapolated from across the collection books. This paper will explore two of those themes in detail,

this was done for clarity and to create groupings of the texts. These themes are Rewriting the Rules and Reconsidering the Loss of Innocence Archetype. Six different texts were used for this written analysis—three for each theme. This helped in analyzing the literature because it allowed the researcher to put the books in conversation with one another.

Rewriting the Rules Throughout the Postcolonial Eras

The teenage years are often considered the years of rebellion. Young people are at the age where they have the need to push back against rules that are imposed upon them. In addition to imposing rules upon young people, our society has long imposed rules against the marginalized and the Othered. In the YA novels *Out of Darkness*, by Ashley Hope Pérez, *March*, by John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell, and *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, by Benjamin Alire Sáenz, readers see young, Othered people navigate the rules of society. Additionally, each of these texts takes place in one of the three eras of postcolonial literature—colonization, struggle for independence, and post-colonial. Through a postcolonial analysis of each of these three novels, it can be seen how young people with postcolonial identities in different historical eras navigate the rules imposed upon them.

Set in 1936-7 Texas, *Out of Darkness* is situated firmly in the American era of de jure segregation. The rules during this time are rigid and set by the oppressive white majority with no input from marginalized peoples.

Mexican American siblings Naomi, Beto, and Cari move from San Antonio to live with the white Henry. Henry is the father of twins Beto and Cari, and Naomi is their half-sister; their mother is dead. Throughout the novel, Henry acts as the physical embodiment of colonization, and his rules are imposed upon the three young Mexican Americans early in the novel: ‘Let’s hear the rules.’... ‘We keep to ourselves. We stay out of trouble. We go to church. We do good in school.’... ‘The main thing is, we don’t talk Spanish in the street or at school or anywhere.’... ‘We call Henry ‘Daddy’” (Pérez, 2015). Additionally, Henry makes Beto and Cari take on the Anglo-sounding versions of their names, Robbie and Carrie. The suppression of their names and forbidding them to speak Spanish is a cornerstone of the rules of colonization for suppressing the Othered. Henry is sending the message that he, as the white oppressor, determines the rules and his newly acquired children have no choice but to conform.

As the novel goes on, the three break one of the most forbidden rules: they befriend—and Naomi falls in love with—an African American boy, Wash. New London has segregated schools (with the white school obviously being better off than the African American school) and a white, rich side of town and a black, poverty-ridden side of town; it is the pinnacle of post-slavery segregation and racism. Naturally, this newly found community of four cannot simply break these rules set by Henry and the rest of society in public. Unfortunately, it is only through this secret community that these characters can grow and be happy in their oppressive world of Henry’s rules, so they take to the

woods. The woods are an archetypal symbol in literature for the place one goes to do what is forbidden—break the rules. The young lovers, in fact, hide in a hollowed-out tree to be together and, as young people do, break another rule by exploring their bodies and budding sexualities. They can only keep their rule-breaking secret for so long, however, as Naomi and Wash’s romance is found out after the explosion at the white school where Cari dies.

This leads to the novel’s violent ending where Henry, enraged by all the rule breaking and Naomi’s refusal to marry him, tortures and kills Wash and rapes and kills Naomi, while Beto watches helplessly. Beto shoots Henry in a futile attempt to save his sister and friend just as Wash’s father comes to Beto’s aid. In an Epilogue, Beto shares the newspaper article that writes Wash as the transgressor and Henry as a grief-stricken victim. The end of this visceral novel leaves a glimmer of hope as a much older and educated Beto, in a very postcolonial fashion, strives to retell what the newspaper wrongly reported:

It wasn’t that Beto wanted to tell the story. It was that he had to. He hoped that, after, he could begin to dream of the fragile joy of the months before the explosion and of the family that they had made for themselves in the woods. They had been happy, for a time, before the rules found them. Before the terrible price was exacted for their transgressions. For the crossing of lines. For friendship, for love. (Pérez, 2015)

Out of Darkness shows readers that, in the colonization era, an Othered community, such as the one that forms



during the novel, must break the oppressive rules in secret—and even then, it is often futile to the violence of colonization.

Moving forward in history out of the era of colonization is the struggle for independence period in postcolonial literature. There is no greater struggle for independence story in American history than the civil rights movement. *March* is the series of autobiographical graphic novels of John Lewis as he challenges the rules of the struggle for independence era. The entire civil rights movement is based upon the principles of breaking the unjust rules: protesting segregated lunch counters, segregated buses, and voter rights among many others. Lewis and other leaders of the movement recognize they have been Othered by both de jure and de facto segregation; they must come together to break these rules confining them.

A key part of the movement that Lewis takes very seriously is the commitment to nonviolence; no matter how much he is tested, Lewis does not break this rule. Nonviolence became a rule of the movement because it is the only way that the activists will be taken seriously by the oppressive society they are trying to break free from. As a young college student in Book One, Lewis was exposed to the concept of nonviolence for the first time hearing Jim Lawson speak. Lewis learned “how we could apply nonviolence, just as Dr. King did in Montgomery, all across America—south and north—to eradicate some of the evils we all faced: the evil of racism, the evil of poverty, the evil of war... His words liberated me. I thought, this is it... this is the way out” (Lewis, Aydin, and Powell, 2015).

In Book Two readers see another rule of the movement that Lewis adheres to. During the March of Washington, Lewis agrees to have the speech he is making on behalf of SNCC edited to better align with other civil rights leaders speaking at the march. He says,

Okay, sir, we'll make the changes. I simply could not say no to Mr. Randolph. In the end, my speech no longer called the president's bill 'too little, too late,' nor called for a 'march through the heart of Dixie, the way Sherman did.'... But when we were finished, I was still satisfied with the speech, as were Forman and Cox. We all agreed that our message was not compromised. (Lewis, Aydin, and Powell, 2015)

Lewis understands that unity within the factions of the movement are much more important to the struggle for independence, so he puts his personal beliefs aside. In other words, the strength of the community will be more beneficial to achieving the goals of the civil rights movement.

However, Lewis does not always restrict himself to following the rules of the movement; he knows that there are times to break the rules and put his own beliefs first. This can be seen in Book Three when Lewis marches at Selma with Dr. King. A letter was drafted by SNCC to Dr. King saying they would support the march but not participate. Lewis, however, thinks, “SNCC would have nothing to do with this march—but it was a SNCC letter, not a Lewis Letter” (Lewis, Aydin, Powell, 2016). Though Lewis is a leader of SNCC, he—as an individual—is fully committed to

the struggle for independence of the civil rights movement and sees it crucial that he march at Selma. Throughout *March*, Lewis must decide which rules are worth following and which rules need to be broken as he navigates the struggle for independence era. Being Lewis dedicated himself to fighting for civil rights at such a young age, the struggle for independence goes on to shape his identity throughout his life. While *March* takes place in the 1960's, it is anchored to the twenty-first century showing Lewis as a member of Congress attending Obama's inauguration. In a postcolonial fashion, this shows the importance history has to the present. For Lewis, it shows that breaking of the rules during the civil rights movement continues to have an impact both for him as a person and for America.

Sáenz's *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* comes to readers from the post-colonial world of 1987 Texas. Young Aristotle (Ari) has lived his entire life isolating himself, but, throughout the novel, he learns a new understanding of his own identity and the rules as his friendship with Dante blossoms into a beautiful romance. The two create a strong friendship as they both encounter the rules of masculinity and their Mexican American identities. At one point, they are talking about Dante's extended family. He says, "They don't like me. They think I'm—well, they think I'm a little different. They're really Mexican, you know. And I'm sort of, well, what did you call me? 'A pocho'" (Sáenz, 2012). Readers can infer that by "different" Dante means gay, as he has a greater understanding of his sexuality throughout the novel than Ari does. Dante realizes, however, that

he does not have to follow these rules of masculinity—he can write his own rules. This is seen symbolically as Dante makes up the rules to the games the two play and becomes more comfortable with himself as a gay man. Sáenz (2012) writes, "We made up the rules as we went along—and they kept changing." The nature of the novel's post-colonial setting gives this community of two the ability to make the rules up.

In the hospital after saving Dante's life from a car accident, Ari also begins to experiment with the idea that he can write his own rules: "Listen, I said. 'Can we have some rules here?'... 'I hate rules. I like to break them mostly.' 'No, Dante, you like to make your own rules. So long as the rules are yours, you like them'" (Sáenz, 2012). Ari's rules are, "Rule number one: We don't talk about the accident. Not ever. Rule number two: Stop saying thank you. Rule number three: This whole thing is not your fault. Rule number four: Let's just move on" (Sáenz, 2012). While these rules are to keep Dante at a distance, it is one of the first times Ari realizes that he—like Dante—can make his own rules.

Unfortunately, this is not to say that rewriting—which is, in a sense, breaking—the existing rules won't result in consequences. For not everyone is comfortable with Dante's rules; he is, unfortunately, still Othered. Dante is seen kissing a boy in an alley and is beat up because he is breaking the rules of masculinity and heteronormativity. Dante ends up in the hospital, and his father explains to Ari what has happened before they go and see him: "They beat him," he whispered. "They beat my Dante all to hell. They cracked some ribs, they punched his face. He has bruises



everywhere. They did that to my son” (Sáenz, 2012). In anger, Ari retaliates, finding one of the boys responsible for attacking Dante and beats him up.

It isn't until much later when Ari has a conversation with his parents about Dante does he realize that he does not need to make rules to protect himself from his love of Dante. They tell Ari that they know he loves Dante, but has been denying it with rules: “Why would you risk your own life to save Dante if you didn't love him?... ‘And why would you go and beat the holy crap out of a guy who hurt him? Why would you do that? All of your instincts, Ari, all of them, tell me something. You love that boy” (Sáenz, 2012). After getting over the initial shame of having his love spoken about in the open, Ari understands that his parents accept him: “For once in my life, I understood my father perfect. And he understood me” (Sáenz, 2012). Having his parents—the primary source of the rules for a teen—accept him makes Ari realize he can rewrite the rules of masculinity and accept himself as a gay man. The final line of the novel is beautiful, as Ari and Dante acknowledge their love of each other: “How could I have ever been ashamed of loving Dante Quintana?” (Sáenz, 2012). Ari is not ashamed he has broken the rules, for he realizes he can write his own rules. While readers do not see Ari go on and fully embrace his newfound ability to rewrite the rules, the novel is hopeful that Ari and Dante, in the community of each other and their families, will go on to write their own rules and, in fact, discover the secrets of the universe together.

Out of Darkness, by Pérez,
March, by Lewis, Aydin, and Powell,

and *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, by Sáenz, all deal with the very important YAL concept of “the rules.” Each of them, however, looks at the rules from a different era in postcolonial literature. In the era of colonization, breaking the rules can result in negative consequences. For Naomi, Wash, and Beto, these consequences turn out to be violent. *Out of Darkness* shows this through the deaths of Naomi and Wash: the terrible cost for attempting to transcend the racial order was their lives. The truth of their story was concealed by this code and Beto must go on to rewrite what has been falsely told. In *March*, Lewis comes together in a community of people fighting for civil rights to break the unfair rules of de jure segregation. Lewis shows how great of an impact civil rights activists can have for generations to come. Lastly, in a post-colonial society, those like Ari and Dante can rewrite the rules. Unfortunately, this is not always without consequences, for they are still Othered. However, there is a certain hopefulness in a world where Ari and Dante can be together and write their own rules. Readers can see, from each of these novels, that the way a character is impacted by the rules differs based upon their historical placement.

Reconsidering the Loss of Innocence Archetype within Young Adult Literature

At times it seems difficult to separate the YA identity quest with the archetypal loss of innocence tale. On the surface, this makes a great deal of sense: a young protagonist searches to reach a better understanding of

themselves and the world only to lose some child-like understanding in favor of a more “adult” perspective. Taking a step back, this idea has the underlying assumption that these protagonists have some sort of innocence to lose in the first place. What happens when we use postcolonial theory to put this assumption under the microscope? In other words, is there a way of reading diverse YAL that would break down the loss of innocence archetype? *Long Way Down*, by Jason Reynolds, *Monster*, by Walter Dean Myers, and *The Hate U Give*, by Angie Thomas are three texts where we could expect to see the loss of innocence narrative. However, when the works are subjected to a postcolonial reading, it is seen that the protagonists never, in fact, have “innocence” to lose; when the postcolonial contexts of these protagonists are considered, these three texts can yield far more complex and rich readings than the loss of innocence narrative.

Will, the protagonist of *Long Way Down*, by Reynolds, lives in a world where “Beef/gets passed down like name-brand/T-shirts... Always too big./ Never ironed out” (Reynolds, 2017). And this is exactly where Will finds himself after his older brother, Shaun, is shot and killed. Knowing The Rules of this beef all too well, Will knows he must enact revenge and shoot, with the gun that has been passed down through his family, his brother’s murderer. Innocence does not exist in Will’s world; he must be prepared for death—both for it to happen around him and to cause it, for Will is no stranger to people close to him being murdered.

When reflecting on the new moon the night of his brother’s death,

he says, “I’ll tell you one thing,/the moon is lucky it’s not down here/where nothing/is ever/new” (Reynolds, 2017). As Will rides the elevator down on the way to find Shaun’s killer, he is visited by a communal of the dead from his past. Among them, two brothers, an uncle, and a father; three of them have already followed The Rules and killed. Will is correct; nothing is ever new. He has encountered death at every turn throughout his life.

Death has left no room for innocence in this teen’s life. Therefore, throughout the novel, he has no innocence left to lose. The ambiguity Reynolds leaves at the end of *Long Way Down* puts it up to the reader whether Will follows The Rules and becomes a killer or not. This very intentional choice of ambiguity by Reynolds itself breaks down the loss of innocence archetype because Will’s narrative is not neatly squared away at the end. While Will’s fate is left open for interpretation, it is certain, however, that his innocence is just like the moon on the night of Shaun’s murder: nowhere to be found.

Like Will, Steve Harmon’s story does not begin in a state of innocence. There is very little we know about Steve, protagonist of Myer’s *Monster*. We know he loves filmmaking; we know he loves his family—specifically his brother. When readers are introduced to Steve, they find out he is in jail and on trial for murder. Based on the scenes that are set before Steve’s trial, we can begin to infer more about his past. King, the man on trial alongside Steve, says, “I need to get paid, man. I ain’t got nothing between my butt and the ground but a rag” (Dean Myers, 1999). Steve agrees, and a woman they are with adds, “You can’t even



hardly make it these days. They talking about cutting welfare, cutting Social Security, and anything else that makes life a little easy. They might as well bring back slavery times if you ask me” (Dean Myers, 1999). This tells us Steve knows, as a young Black boy in society, he is systematically Othered. Additionally, it alludes to the fact that Steve’s family is struggling financially.

This is not the mindset of a boy with innocence to lose. The same idea can be seen throughout the trial. Repeatedly Steve’s trial is called a “motion case.” Meaning, because he is the legal system’s Other, his innocence is not the jury’s concern. They are only thinking about convicting him. His lawyer, O’Brien, voices this in one of their meetings: “You’re young, you’re Black, and you’re on trial. What else do they need to know? (Dean Myers, 1999). Steve and O’Brien cannot possibly be concerned with Steve’s nonexistent childhood innocence when they are fighting an uphill battle against a legal system that makes Steve the Other. When we consider Steve’s context as a Black, lower class male fighting the legal system, it is clear that *Monster* is much more than a simple loss of innocence story.

Similar to Reynold’s *Long Way Down*, Myers leaves a major point of ambiguity at the end of *Monster*. Steve is found innocent by the jury; however, the truth about his involvement with the crime is never explicitly revealed. Readers are left responsible to determine whether or not the jury reached the right verdict—both legally and morally. Even if Steve did play the small role of surveying the drug store before the robbery turned murder,

thus making him guilty by the rules of the court, readers have to decide if this makes him deserving of being convicted of felony murder, as he was charged. Only Steve knows the fully story, and it is his alone to carry.

Starr Carter is also no stranger to encountering crime. With the death of one of her best friends at the hands of a police officer being the inciting incident of the plot in Thomas’s *The Hate U Give*, it is easy to think that the death of Starr’s innocence is inevitable. Although, Khalil is not the first friend Starr has held while they are taking their dying breaths. A key detail of Starr’s past is the death of her friend Natasha she witnessed in their neighborhood. Death is nothing new for teenage Starr. Additionally, the way people of color are treated by the police was something Starr knew all too well before Khalil’s murder: “When I was twelve, my parents had two talks with me. One was the usual birds and bees... The other was about what to do if a cop stopped me... ‘you do whatever they tell you to do... Keep your hands visible. Don’t make any sudden moves. Only speak when they speak to you” (Thomas, 2017). Clearly, Starr is wise beyond her years and not naively innocent. She knows that people like her—like Khalil—are Othered by the police.

Thug Life, as allusion to Tupac meaning “The Hate U Give Little Infants F---s Everybody”, is a major theme of the novel presented moments before Khalil dies; it is Thomas’ way of explaining the Othering Black Americans face (Thomas, 2017). Thug Life reemerges during the novel’s most pivotal passage when Tupac is playing while Starr and her dad are riding in the car. Starr and

Maverick discuss the Black Panthers, racism, Nat Turner, and why people deal drugs: “They need money,’ I say. ‘And they don’t have a lot of other ways to get it.” Right. Lack of opportunities,” Daddy says. ‘Corporate America don’t bring jobs to our communities, and they damn sure ain’t quick to hire us” (Thomas, 2017). Just like Steve understands he is the Other of the justice system, Maverick and Starr understand they are the Other of corporate America. A loss on innocence narrative could not possibly include a protagonist with as much understanding of her own postcolonial situation as Starr. This conversation is so pivotal because it is where Starr fully concludes she needs to use her voice in an attempt to get justice for Khalil and everyone who looks like him: “This is bigger than me and Khalil though. This is about Us, with a capital U; everybody who looks like us, feels like us, and is experiencing this pain with us despite not knowing me or Khalil. My silence isn’t helping Us” (Thomas, 2017). *The Hate U Give* is not a loss of innocence story; it is the narrative of a girl who, through tragedy, finds the room to use her voice in a world that has long told her that her voice shouldn’t be heard.

The notion that the loss of innocence narrative is inseparable from YAL must be abandoned. A postcolonial reading of *Long Way Down*, *Monster*, and *The Hate U Give* shows that there are YA identity quests that, in fact, have nothing to do with loss of innocence. Steve is fighting for his legal innocence and freedom in a system that doesn’t want him to win. Starr is fighting for her voice in a world of Thug Life that doesn’t want her to be heard. Will is faced with the decision between following The

Rules and joining the communal of the dead he is visited by or defying fate. These three texts are far more complex than the loss of innocence archetype. The implications of the fact that all three of these young people inhabit Othered identities—and are aware of it—readers see that they are not in a position to live in a state of innocence. Tupac’s message redefining Thug Life, as “The Hate U Give Little Infants F---s Everybody,” resonates throughout all three of these novels. Thomas, obviously makes it an explicit theme throughout *The Hate U Give*. Myers, through Steve’s screenplay, sheds light on Thug Life in America’s justice system. Thug Life appears in Will’s story through the rules and the heavy prevalence of gun violence in the teen’s life. While it is easy to assume three characters like Will, Steve, and Starr travel the predictable loss of innocence story arc, reading these three texts through a postcolonial lens proves that this is not the full story.

Implications

Overall, the findings of this study show that contemporary, diverse YAL is rich enough to be read and analyzed through a framework of postcolonial literary theory. The postcolonial framework proved to be successful in attempting to synthesize the broad range of texts this research considered. The use of creating two themes of The Rules and Reconsidering the Loss of Innocence Archetype shows that these texts can work in conjunction with one another to achieve a holistic analysis of complex and relevant topics. If complexity of content and engagement is ever a concern, a strong selection of diverse young adult literature will surely put these worries to rest.



My analysis and use of postcolonial theory using diverse YAL illustrates this complexity. Postcolonial theory allows for in-depth analysis of the rules that Othered youth in our society face; it also brings to light new ways of reading and thinking about characters within the YA genre. *March*, for example, both provides an untold narrative from one of the most crucial moments in American history and shows the impact it continues to have. Similarly, *The Hate U Give* shows the reality of what growing up is like for certain populations of youth in America. The modern, culturally relevant ELA classroom needs to give students the tools to put unfair power structures and inequity on trial. A postcolonial analysis of literature addressing many of these issues, such as much of the literature used in this study, can do just that.

However, that is not to say that this research is all-encompassing; it, in fact, opens the door for a great deal of further research. This research was focused on the Printz Awards winners and honor books in addition to a few other works, but there is a great deal of literature worth analyzing not included in this research. While the use

of postcolonial theory was beneficial to the synthesis of this research, it is not the only literary theory that could be used to analyze these texts or other works of diverse YAL. Feminist theory, for example, is frequently paired with postcolonial theory because feminist theory similarly analyzes unfair power structures, and Marxist theory can lead to conversations about portrayals of class in YAL. This research is meant to start the conversation around this growing body of literature.

Additionally, theoretical research is no substitute for actually implementing diverse YA texts in the classroom. The theoretical literature used to gather background knowledge for this study suggests that other educators and researchers are similarly convinced, through their own research or even classroom use, that diverse YAL can be enriching to a classroom. Pairing this with the findings of this research, educators should be prepared to go forward with the confidence that they will see students engaged as they work with diverse YA literature.

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Appendix

Alexie, S. (2007). *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. New York, Ny: Little Brown and Company.

Summary:

Junior has lived his entire life on the Spokane Indian reservation. As he is about to begin high school, Junior decides he needs to go to the nearby all-white school instead of the reservation school in search of a better education. Because of this, he is seen a traitor by most people on the rez—most notably his best friend, Rowdy. Junior must face both the challenges of attending a new school and being hated by many of his own people.

Key Themes and Ideas:

Already being used in many classrooms across the country, *Part-Time Indian* is a text that provides the opportunity to read about the state of life for Indians living on reservations. This includes the internalization of being the Other and the carrying of historical trauma. Junior is faced with the struggle of trying to reconcile with his home life on the reservation and navigate a new community at the school he begins to attend.

Challenges of the Novel:

An often-overlooked part of *Part-Time Indian* are the white, middle-class, “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” values that are the center of a lot of Junior’s actions. With this in mind, it is too easy to take this text at face value and label it as being all-encompassing of the American Indian experience. Here we are reminded of Adichie’s TED Talk “The danger of a single story.”

Additionally, in the wake of the #MeToo movement, the multiple allegations of sexual harassment against Alexie cannot be overlooked. Teachers need to be prepared with an understanding of the allegations and consider how it might affect their teaching of this book.

Reading Recommendations:

The language of this novel is extremely accessible for most readers. On top of this, the way the novel relies so heavily on illustrations make it an engaging read. Grades: 7-10

Lake, N. (2012). *In Darkness*. London, Great Britain: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Summary:

Young chimère, Shorty, finds himself trapped in the rubble of a collapsed hospital after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. As he narrates his life story, it is discovered he shares a mysterious link with Toussaint l’Ouverture, the leader of the Haitian slave rebellion. The novel alternates chapters between the story of Shorty living in modern Haiti and the history of Toussaint fighting for Haiti’s independence from France.

Key Themes and Ideas:

In Darkness makes students read imperial history from a nonwestern perspective. Additionally, the way Lake ties Shorty and Toussaint together opens the door for discussion about how colonization still has lasting effects today.

Challenges of the Novel:

One challenge to reading *In Darkness* is the heavy prevalence of Haitian Creole throughout the novel. While Lake explains the meaning of these parts when necessary, it can still be a challenge for some readers. *In Darkness* is also the only text in this research where the author has written outside of their own identity; Lake is a British author, and Shorty is a Haitian boy. This raises questions of authenticity of the work and whether or not an author has the right to write from a perspective that is not their own.

Reading Recommendations:

In Darkness gives a fresh take on history that

many classrooms are lacking. The narrative style can at times be confusing but is, for the most part, engaging. Grades:10-12

Lewis, J., Aydin, A., Powell, N. (2016). *March*. Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions.

Summary:

This series of three graphic novels is the autobiographical narrative of John Lewis throughout the civil rights movement. Lewis becomes the chairman of the organization SNCC. The narrative follows Lewis through the civil rights movement as he participates in protests at lunch counters, joins in the Freedom Rides, speaks at the March of Washington, and marches at Selma.

Key themes and Ideas:

In many ways, *March* could qualify as a lost narrative, as modern education focuses on the likes of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X; however, Lewis's story is a crucial part of the civil rights movement. Additionally, the first-hand story of civil rights can be very powerful in a classroom. Being told in graphic novels, the series is able to cover a wide range of history in relatively few pages.

Challenges of the Novel:

The biggest challenge with using *March* is the fact that it is a series. While each novel stands alone fairly well, a teacher would need to commit to having students read three books to entirely cover Lewis's story. This can take a lot of time and resources out of an already packed curriculum. Additionally, a danger of using an autobiography to teach about a topic as large as the civil rights movement is students walking away with the misconception that this is the most important or only story from that era to know.

Reading Recommendations:

March would be a fantastic work to teach in conjunction with a history unit on the civil rights era. The form of a graphic novel makes it a good candidate for reluctant readers, and

the autobiographical nature makes it useful for lovers of nonfiction. Grades: 9-12

Myers, W. D. (1999). *Monster*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers.

Summary:

Steve is on trial for felony murder; he has been accused of being a part of a robbery turned murder. Through the screenplay of his trial and his notes, he shares with readers the story of his trial. Readers follow Steve's story as he deals with court, lawyers, and his parents' changing view of him.

Key Themes and Ideas:

The form of the screenplay makes *Monster* a very interesting text for students to explore. Throughout the piece are themes of race and class. It provides a lot of opportunities to discuss the justice system and why people commit crime.

Challenges of the Novel:

Race and the mistreatment of people of color in the justice system are at the forefront of *Monster*. This provides a lot of opportunities for teaching moments; however, teachers need to be prepared to approach these topics with care.

Reading Recommendations:

The text is extremely rich in content and form of the screenplay can be a refreshing change of pace from the novel for all students. Grades: 6-10

Na, A. (2001). *A Step From Heaven*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Summary:

Young Ju Park and her parents immigrate from Korea to the United States during Young Ju's very early childhood. Na goes on to tell the story of Young Ju's life in a variety of vignettes. Readers see Young Ju as she learns English, experiences shame in her immigrant parents, grow up with an abusive, alcoholic father, and



graduate high school.

Key Ideas and Themes:

Na beautifully tells the story of what immigrating to the United States can be like for a young girl. This includes topics such as learning English and teaching her parents English as a kindergartener, inner conflict between retaining Korean culture and assimilation, and wanting to make parents who sacrificed so much for her proud.

Challenges of the Novel:

To maintain authenticity, Na leaves many Korean words in her novel; mainly, these are names for family members such as mother, father, and brother. For some readers this could create confusion. Additionally, Na does not censor herself when talking about the abuse Young Ju, her mother, and her brother face at the hands of her father. The topic of an abusive parent can be difficult to broach with young readers.

Reading Recommendations:

The way the book is written in vignettes and the fact that it is a fairly short text, it is easy to digest. The book does an excellent job of mimicking the main character's journey with learning English, as the language becomes more complex as the narrative progresses.

Grades: 6-8

Pérez, A. H. (2015). *Out of Darkness*. Minneapolis, MN: Lerner Publishing Group, Inc..

Summary:

Out of Darkness is set in 1936-7 in New London, Texas. Naomi and her younger half-siblings Beto and Cari move from living with their grandparents in San Antonio to live with Henry, the father of the twins and an oil worker. The three begin attending the white school. They also befriend Wash, a Black boy Naomi's age. Wash and Naomi slowly fall in love. However, Henry has other plans for her, as he wishes to marry her because of her

resemblance to his ex-wife—the deceased mother of Naomi and the twins.

Key Themes and Ideas:

This novel presents students the racism towards African Americans and Mexican Americans that has been a part of American history in all the realness and horror one would expect from 1937 Texas. This allows students to read and talk about the different forms—Othering for example—racism has taken in America. While it is one voice narrating the novel, each chapter takes the perspective of a different character. Including Naomi, Beto, Wash, and Henry, this allows the narrative to be considered from a variety of different perspectives. Additionally, there are key scenes in the novel where Henry pushes Beto to act the way he believes a young American boy should. These scenes open the door for conversations about masculinity.

Challenges of the Novel:

This novel—especially the ending—is extremely real, visceral, and violent. This includes violence motivated by racism and sexual violence and pedophilia. The fear of this novel being triggering for some cannot be ignored. These can be extremely difficult conversations to broach in a classroom. However, when handled with the proper care, these are extremely important topics to acknowledge.

Reading Recommendations:

The violence present in this text and the length of the novel may make it a difficult piece of literature for a full class. Many of the sensitive topics within the novel require guidance, so it may not be the best text to be independently read by some students. Grades: 11-12

Sáenz, B. A. (2012). *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Summary:

Aristotle has struggled with understanding the rules and who he is. When he develops a strong friendship with Dante things get all the more complicated. As the friendship between the two boys slowly morphs into a romance, Ari finally begins to understand who he really is.

Key Themes and Ideas:

In addition to being a work of LGBT fiction, this novel is a beautiful romance. This opens the novel up to both discussions of the LGBT community and romance of young people. Prominently featuring the families of the two boys, there are themes of different family dynamics present. The main theme of the novel centers around Ari's understanding of identity.

Challenges of the Novel:

Unfortunately, any time a teacher wants to make a piece of LGBT fiction a part of their curriculum, there will be pushback to go along with it. A teacher needs to be prepared to justify the selection of the novel beyond the presence of LGBT characters.

Reading Recommendations:

This novel is rich enough in content that it could be good for any reader. Additionally, it is a beautiful romance with a certain hopefulness that makes it a good candidate for a full class read. Though it is a teen romance, it is extremely chaste. Grades: 9-12

Satrapi, M. (2004). *The Complete Persepolis*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.

Summary:

Marjane Satrapi tells her life story in the form of a graphic novel. Throughout her childhood, Satrapi and her family cope with political turmoil in Iran. As war breaks out, however, her parents decide to send young Marjane to school in Austria. Her time in Europe does not necessarily go as planned, and she returns home as a young adult to be with her family

before deciding to leave Iran for good.

Key Themes and Ideas:

Satrapi is able to convey global issues in a way that is engaging and accessible to students. Through the way she explains her family's involvement in the political sphere, the complicated nature of politics and war can be explored. Additionally, by the way she shares about her time in Austria, Satrapi presents ideas about how domestic disputes can be viewed globally.

Challenges of the Novel:

The biggest challenge to *Persepolis* seems to be the global perspective which it provides. Obviously, it is important for students to read literature set outside of the Americas, so scaffolding this graphic novel with a sufficient coverage of Iranian history is useful.

Reading Recommendations:

Both her use of language and images make Satrapi's novel extremely accessible for nearly any reader, but the content is rich enough to still engage older students. Grades: 7-12

Reynolds, J. (2017). *Long Way Down*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Summary:

After witnessing his brother get murdered, Will feels the call to enact revenge and shoot his brother's murderer. As he is riding the elevator down, he is visited by his past as he must decide whether to kill or not.

Key Themes and Ideas:

Long Way Down is a beautifully written novel in verse. Written in 2017, this allows for an analysis of modern poetry. Throughout the novel Will struggles with "The Rules" he learned growing up—these are the rules that require him to become a killer. The deceased members of his family are a major portion of the plot and Will's struggle to make his decision. Additionally, the novel ends very ambiguously which allows a lot of room for



student interpretation.

Challenges with the Novel:

It seems that many students have an aversion to poetry. Getting students to buy in to a reading of *Long Way Down* for this reason may prove challenging.

Reading Recommendations:

Long Way Down has the potential to create a whole new generation of lovers of poetry. The text is written in accessible language but still has many literary qualities. Being it is poetry, it is a quick read that would work well for an entire class. Grades: 8-12

Thomas, A. (2017). *The Hate U Give*. London: Great Britain: Walker Books.

Summary:

After watching her friend die at the hands of a police officer, life will never be the same for Starr. She now views the fact that she is one of the few Black students at a suburban private school and lives in an inner-city neighborhood ruled by two rival gangs very differently. Through the love and support of her friends and family, Starr works toward finding her voice to speak for justice for her friend and against the mistreatment of people of color in society.

Key Themes and Ideas:

The Hate U Give makes readers consider what life is like for a teenage girl of color in America. Readers are reminded of the Black Lives Matter movement as themes pertaining to race, gang life, and police brutality fill nearly every page. The novel is filled with a wide variety of dynamic characters that give the novel many facets to analyze and discuss.

Challenges of the Novel:

A challenge of *The Hate U Give* is the length of the novel. At over 400 pages, there is the worry that students will not commit to reading the novel. With the strong ties to the Black Lives Matter movement, this novel covers a lot of

mature content. This includes but isn't limited to police brutality, gang violence, drug dealing, and interracial relationships. In a classroom where students come from a variety of different racial, political, or socioeconomic backgrounds, these highly politicised and mature topics can be difficult to discuss.

Reading Recommendations:

The amount of time a teacher would need to carve out in their curriculum to do this complex novel justice makes it a difficult candidate for a full-class read; however, the book is rich enough that it could engage an entire class. Grades: 10-12

Yang, G. L. (2006). *American Born Chinese*. New York, NY: Square Fish.

Summary:

Yang's graphic novel follows three storylines. Jin Wang is the son of Chinese immigrants trying to navigate school and being different than his white classmates. Jin becomes friends with Wei-Chen, an immigrant from Taiwan who joins his class; Wei-Chen helps Jin land a date with the white classmate he has a crush on. The next storyline is Danny's. Danny is a "normal" American boy who is well-liked in school; however, he has feels a lot of embarrassment when his cousin Chin-Kee—who is portrayed as a bit of a Chinese caricature—comes to visit. Thirdly, is the mythic tale of the Monkey King. The Monkey King is a good ruler and a master of kung fu, but he isn't allowed in heaven with the gods. Angered by this, the Monkey King lashes out and rejects his Monkey-ness. All three of these narratives collide in the end of the novel.

Key Themes and Ideas:

American Born Chinese uniquely and masterfully handles multiple storylines that makes it an engaging text. The postcolonial idea of Othering is a key theme throughout the entire novel; readers see this concept from many different angles. Jin's identity quest as the novel's primary protagonist provides

multiple points for discussion. Jin navigates friendship, love, and his hybridity between being an American teen and his Chinese heritage.

Challenges of the Novel:

The biggest challenge with teaching American Born Chinese is how to approach the character Chin-Kee. Chin-Kee is written and drawn in a way that would embody any negative Chinese stereotype one could think of. All his dialogue is written to be read in heavily accented English. Teachers need to be prepared to make sure Yang's portrayal and use of Chin-Kee is not taken at face value. Yang is dramatizing the stereotypes to

illustrate the way Chinese Americans can be Othered.

Reading Recommendation:

American Born Chinese is a rich enough text that it could be used as a full class text. The fact that it is a graphic novel may also make it a helpful book to give reluctant readers.

Grades: 8-10