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## Unsettling Representations of Identities: A Critical Review of Diverse Youth Literature

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Nearly 30 years since Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop's (1990) call for more books that serve as mirrors for youth of color, an increasing number of authors and illustrators of color have contributed to the field of youth literature. Books by authors of color still fall far behind the number of publications by white authors (Horning, 2015; CCBC, 2017) and disproportionately reflect the demographics of youth in the U.S., who are increasingly diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, language, and socioeconomic status. Thus, in addition to demanding that youth of color are represented in literature, it is important to examine how authors construct these literary representations and to what extent these representations reflect current scholarly discussions about identity discourses.

Scholars in education and youth literature have shifted their focus away from multiculturalism towards more critical discourses in ethnic studies, although ethnic studies movements have always played an important part in the organization of the field of youth literature (e.g. Jiménez-García, 2017; Capshaw, 2014). Dimitriadis and McCarthy (2001) explain that multiculturalism has become "a set of propositions about identity, knowledge, power, and change in education, a kind of normal science, which attempts to 'discipline' difference rather than be transformed by it" (p. 113). The authors argued that other critical discourses, such as critical theory, cultural studies, and postcolonial theory to name a few, are better suited to address "the current eruption of difference and plurality in social life now invading the school" (p. 113). How might we reconsider the experiences of youth of color and their literary representations, drawing on theories from ethnic studies? How might, for instance, an understanding of the U.S. as a settler colony rather than a nation of immigrants (Tuck & Yang, 2012) shift our thinking about representations of youth of color in literature? What opportunities do the texts offer in terms of resisting the colonial logics that manage difference through generality (Mignolo, 2009)?

In this article we conduct a critical review of thirty-six children's and young adult texts written by authors of color and examine how youth literature has engaged recent shifts in identity discourses. Specifically, we discuss a need to "unsettle" (Tuck & Yang, 2012) previous approaches to identity representations based on strategic essentialist discourses. We argue that representations of identity in recently published youth literature favor, and to an extent recover, discourses and texts that acknowledge youth identities as fluid, overlapping, and intersecting. We draw on concepts from postcolonial theory (Appadurai, 1996; Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin,

2013), decolonial theory (Tuck & Yang, 2012), culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014), and intersectionality (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1994) to frame our discussion of youth literature and the discursive, rhetorical, and intellectual moves authors of color make to represent the complex and intersecting identities of youth of color.

We organize our critical review along four broad themes and assertions. First, authors use formats such as picture books and graphic novels to create nuanced portraits of race and culture. Second, memoirs and historical fiction serve as genres to engage the complex and interconnected histories of communities of color, especially during the era of U.S. Civil Rights Movement. Third, realistic fiction, poetry, and anthologies explore the intersections of language, race, gender, and sexuality for youth of color and function as counter-narratives that either celebrate these identities or document their marginality across various social contexts. Fourth, speculative fiction, including fantasy, science fiction, and dystopian narratives, envision alternative realities and futures in which youth of color draw on their ancestry as sources of strength. We conclude with a reflection on the body of work we reviewed and suggestions for the future of diverse youth literature.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Scholars of ethnic studies, including movements in Black, Indigenous, Chican@, Asian American and Puerto Rican Studies in the 1970s and beyond, offer a critique of the U.S. as an empire with a history of settler colonialism and colonial erasure (Bonilla, 1987; Capshaw Smith, 2004; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Patel, 2014). Literature, the makeup of the canon, and specifically young people's reading materials have long been central to curriculum and canonical debates. Indeed, the history of multicultural literature, and discussions centered on race, culture, language, and ultimately more diverse youth adult literature represent a reconsideration of the canon of U.S. general literature from the ground up. Shaobo Xie (2000) writes on the possibilities of children's literature and its scholarship as reordering the consequences of colonization:

Children... are most violently subjected to colonialist ideas of racial-ethnic Otherness at the most formative years of their lives. If children's literature and the criticism of children's literature take upon themselves to decolonize the world, they will prove the most effective project in the long run, for the world ultimately belongs to children. (p. 13)

Xie's statement here is a radical one in terms of thinking through how the logics of colonialism have influenced the ways in which literary studies and the canon were formed.

At its core, the creation and scholarship of diverse literature is a counter-hegemonic project, and the various shifts in schools of thought regarding diverse literature reflect a progression of how authors and scholars continue unsettling those logics. Even the recent turn toward talking about “diversity” reveals a sense of representing issues beyond race and ethnicity, particularly issues of intersectionality, a term borrowed from critical race theory that underlines, among other things, the overlapping of race, gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, and culture (Crenshaw, 1994).

Recent shifts in U.S. demographics, the political landscape, as well as theories and pedagogies have further challenged how we might understand identity categories such as race, class, gender, language, and nationality, and how these are represented in youth literature.

Appadurai (1996) notes:

As groups migrate, regroup in new locations, reconstruct their histories, and reconfigure their ethnic projects, the *ethno* in ethnography takes on a slippery, nonlocalized quality... The landscapes of group identity—the *ethnoscapes*—around the world are no longer familiar anthropological objects, insofar as groups are no longer tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, historically unselfconscious, or culturally homogenous. (p. 48)

In other words, with every wave of migration or displacement, we should expect interconnected histories and communities. These displacements, whether temporary, permanent, or forced, cause discursive shifts in how identities are understood and highlight their current and historical social constructions.

Nieto (1997), for instance, reminds us that Latinx is not “a monolithic group,” and that “differences in national origin, geography, native language, race, class, place of birth, and length of residence in the United States” (p. 61) should remain in the purview. Likewise, Jiménez-Román and Flores (2010) suggest that a new understanding of Afro-Latinx might actually change how we think of terms such as Black and African American, especially when the “Afro-Latin@ presence in the United States predates not only the nation’s founding but also the first English settlements” (p. 17). Thus, our view of cultural diversity must uphold that literature about Latinx, Asian, Black, and Indigenous peoples reflects entangled histories and stories of conquest manifesting in racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity within each ethnic group.

Education research supports that youth of color have intersecting identities that shift in response to local contexts and across generations, requiring nuanced pedagogical approaches (Paris, 2009; Paris & Alim, 2014; Rolon-Dow & Irizarry, 2014). For example, Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014) re-envision asset pedagogies like Funds of Knowledge (Moll & Gonzalez, 1994) and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) not only to validate and maintain the linguistic, cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds of students of color but also to affirm the new community practices youth develop when they live in diverse communities. Such a pedagogical approach creates a demand for youth literature that reflects the shifting identities of youth of color broadly. As well, this pedagogy requires a critical approach to analyzing diverse texts for youth, as using a singular lens such as race or gender to examine the experiences of youth might not sufficiently engage issues of ethnic or linguistic identities, immigrant status, social class, and cultural expectations of gender or sexual identities.

We also draw on the theory of intersectionality (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1994) to engage the tensions between pan-ethnic identity categories as they intersect with race, gender, sexuality, and social class in youth literature. Intersectionality, a term coined by Crenshaw (1994) in the field of critical race theory, contends that people of color do not experience identity categories discretely, and that understanding any singular identity category requires also realizing that it intersects with other identity categories. In addition to examining how identity categories intersect within individuals, an intersectional analysis also considers how individuals experience and resist oppressions related to their identities within their communities and through their interactions with institutions such as schools or government agencies (Collins, 1990). Paying attention to the intersections of individual, community, and institutional contexts in diverse youth literature has the potential to reveal the ways in which some identities become marginalized at particular social, political, and historical moments and how youth navigate these margins (Collins, 1990).

In thinking about 21<sup>st</sup> century ways young people choose to identify, and how children's and young adult literature reflects such shifts, we consider that such new forms may have existed for some time. The history of U.S. American literature is marked by the various cultures and ethnic groups that have formed part of the nation's literary landscape. In this canon, African American, Latinx, and Indigenous peoples continue fighting for representation. Yet, beyond the mere inclusion of ethnic communities, a desire persists for more nuanced portrayals of such

diverse histories and cultures in their own right. For example, authors have recently begun to critique the parameters of categories such as “African American,” “Latinx,” and “Indigenous” in the U.S. including stereotypes of place, gender, and race. More and more, young people are asking for a deeper understanding of Afro-Latinx and Indigenous Latinx history, making intersectionality, decolonial, and postcolonial theory helpful frameworks for studying these experiences.

U.S. writers and thinkers of color have produced youth literature since the late nineteenth century. For example, as early as 1898, Cuban poet, writer, and theorist José Martí began publishing his magazine *La Edad de Oro (The Golden Age)*, which was dedicated to “the children of the Americas” and also celebrated Indigenous heritage. In the African American community in the 1920s, W.E.B. Dubois published *The Brownies Book* filled with stories and images instilling cultural pride and upholding community and solidarity among young Black readers ( Bishop, 1990, 1994, 2007; Harris, 1997; Capshaw Smith, 2004). Pura Belpré began telling stories to African American, Puerto Rican, and Jewish children in New York City as early as the 1920s, ultimately publishing her first book of folklore, *Perez and Martina*, in 1931. Librarians of color also played a central role in creating literary spaces for communities of color. The New York Public Library, under the leadership of Anne Carroll Moore, was the first U.S. library to offer services specifically for young people, and set the marker for diverse librarianship through the hiring of Augusta Baker and Pura Belpré. From the 1970s on, pioneer Chinese American librarians also fostered community spaces and provided essential services, such as children’s story hours, to Asian Americans across the U.S. (Liu, 2000). These placements were important because they positioned people of color, especially women of color, as storytellers and facilitators of library services for multi-ethnic communities. The intricacy and creativity of this early wave of writers and librarians highlights the importance of youth literature, and youth literary spaces, such as libraries and cultural arts centers, as intellectual spaces for writers of color. These intellectual spaces served as a forum for imagining the literary and cultural needs of people of color, for asserting an American identity, and for firmly placing authors of color at the inception of youth literature.

The early movement of youth literature authors and scholars of color focused on affirming the experiences of communities of color in ways that resisted stereotypes as well as depicted strategies for overcoming racial and social injustice, particularly because when these

communities were depicted by mainstream white authors it was usually from a paradigm of deficit (CIBC, 1976; Rollins, 1947). African American, Asian American, Latinx, and Indigenous peoples today continue fighting for representation. Yet, beyond merely including ethnic representations in the literary canon, a desire persists for more nuanced portrayals of diverse histories and cultures.

### **Researcher Positionality**

We acknowledge that our arguments stem, in part, from our own perspectives and experiences as multilingual women of color, readers, educators, and researchers. Sybil, for instance, is a Black Haitian woman who grew up speaking French, Haitian Creole, and English, and who immigrated to the U.S. at age 15. Her experiences living in Haiti and the U.S. have contributed to her understanding of identity categories like race as socially constructed and as fluid across cultural contexts. As an education researcher and avid reader of young adult literature, she sees the importance of locating and analyzing stories that highlight the heterogeneity of cultural communities. Marilisa is a Puerto Rican woman who was born on the island and migrated to New York as a young girl. She grew up speaking fluent English and Spanish. Her experiences living in New York, Florida, and returning to New York as an adult, contribute to her view of how cultural, linguistic, national, and racial identities shift in varying scenarios. As a researcher of Latinx literature, she sees the value of studying how authors have been categorized in U.S. and Latin American literature, and sometimes excluded entirely, due to essentialist views, particularly around race and language. Our many conversations revealed how our experiences shape our argument that youth need stories that reflect their lived realities, which are increasingly more complex given the discursive shifts about identities in a global context. Thus, we draw broadly on education research as well as specifically on critical theories to help us engage narratives located at these intersections.

### **Texts Selected**

In our consideration of what authors and texts to include in this critical review of youth literature, we paid particular attention to books published within the last 15 years in the U.S., ideally reflecting contemporary social issues and complex representations of identities. As well, we found it useful to examine books and authors that won awards for their literary portrayals of characters and communities of color. We paid special attention to books that won multiple awards and/or honors across categories as these suggested intersectional content. For example,

*Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (Sáenz, 2014), which won the Lambda Literary Award, the Pura Belpré Award, the Stonewall Book Award, and the Printz Honor for its literary merit, depicts the intersectional identities of gay Mexican American youth. We also consulted book lists generated by the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) and the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) for titles recommended for youth and that do not fit easily within a particular pan-ethnic label (for instance, youth from Caribbean countries who are not Latinx or immigrants from African nations). Finally, the blogs We Need Diverse Books (WNDB) and Diversity in YA proved useful to consider books that represent diversity at various intersections.

In the sections that follow, we review 38 books that reflect how authors and illustrators of color envision the ways in which youth of color live in heterogeneous communities that share entangled histories as well as how writers represent the myriad ways in which the identities of youth of color intersect. We organize our discussion according to narrative themes as they relate to our conceptual framework and argue that some genres and formats are well suited to particular themes.

### **Cultural Visibility: Picture Books and Graphic Novels**

While early authors worked against deficit stereotypes, contemporary authors and illustrators of color continue to demand to be culturally visible by writing and illustrating stories in multiple formats and genres. From picture books to comic books, visual narratives have the potential to unsettle colonial constructions of race that “consider a group’s unchangeable physical characteristics to be linked in a direct, causal way to psychological or intellectual characteristics, and which on this basis distinguishes between ‘superior’ and ‘inferior’ racial groups” (Ashcroft et al., 2013, p. 219). First, by visually portraying difference, images resist ethnocentric universal readings. Second, writers and artists convey the heterogeneity of cultural communities through images that challenge stereotypes. Third, visual representations illuminate the internalized effects of racism, marginalization, or other trauma, and augment textual descriptions in compelling ways.

One prominent author and illustrator challenging homogenous views of African American, Afro-Caribbean, and Afro-Latinx literature is Eric Velasquez. As a successful illustrator, Velasquez has won NAACP awards and Coretta Scott King awards for his artwork in books such as *Beautiful Moon: A Child's Prayer* (Bolden, 2014) and *The Piano Man* (Chocolate,

1998). Velasquez also penned and illustrated the picture books *Grandma's Records* (Velasquez, 2001) and *Grandma's Gift* (Velasquez, 2010), resisting stereotypes of Blackness in the U.S. with stories from his childhood featuring his strong relationship with his grandmother. In *Grandma's Gift*, Velasquez (2010), who has sometimes identified as Afro-Caribbean, underlines the importance of young people knowing their history and having cultural role models. In one scene, young Eric and Abuela visit New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art and see a painting of Juan de Pareja, the slave and apprentice of Spanish painter Diego Velazquez. The painting, along with Abuela, inspires young Eric to cultivate his "gift."

*Dreaming in Indian: Contemporary Native American Voices* (Charleyboy & Leatherdale, 2014) is a young adult anthology that resists stereotypical representations of Native Americans as a homogenous group rooted in the past (Reese, 2016). Instead, the stories move in both directions— addressing the aftermath of colonialism as well as contemporary cultural expressions by featuring the voices of young Indigenous writers and artists about their experiences growing up Native American. In addition to poetry and short stories, the anthology includes visual arts -- black and white photographs, paintings, sequential art narratives (comics), and digital art -- that highlight the diverse perspectives of contemporary Native Americans. The latest anthology by Charleyboy and Leatherdale, *Urban Tribes: Native Americans in the City* (2015), continues not only to highlight the diversity and enduring social issues Native American youth face in cities across North America, but also to document their achievements and new iterations of cultural expression such as Electric Pow Wow music. These stories resist homogenous and stereotypical representations of Native American youth as well as highlight the need for more narratives about the lives of contemporary Native youth.

The graphic memoir *Dark Room: A Memoir in Black and White* (Weaver, 2012) also represents a reconsideration of Black and Latinx experiences during the Civil Rights Movement. Through her hand-drawn illustrations, Weaver utilizes the kind of public pedagogy offered by the graphic novel to challenge readers' understanding of the U.S. Black-White racial binary, particularly in the South. The plot centers on her Argentinian family's move to Marion, Alabama during the upheaval of race relations in 1961. Young Lila, the main character, witnesses how some of her family members are categorized as White, while other members with darker skin are treated suspiciously by Southerners who do not know how to categorize Latinos. Caught in this Black-White binary, Lila calls her Latino community a "sliver of gray" (p. 19) and uses the word

“triqueño,” which she “applies to a palette of skin tones belonging to mixed-race people in Latino Cultures” (pp. 82-83). Her family, surrounded by protests and violence, also experience discrimination for speaking a language other than English. Lila struggles with navigating the world of her family members who speak Spanish, and her world where she wants to fit in as an American. She thinks, “If I could only seal off my parents and prevent our worlds from intersecting, how much freer I'd feel” (p. 129). However, Lila comes to realize that she too is caught in a racial binary. Although her lighter skin tone secures a sense of privilege in the community, it also comes at a cost. When she tries to break up a fight between two Black students in the locker room, one girl tells her to stay out of it: “You! Always in black folks’ way about something” (p. 226). Lila gets righteous and explains that she has also lost white friends for standing up for racial equality (p. 227). Lila cannot separate her home and school realities, and while she longs for a society that reflects her diverse heritage, she also realizes that “it’s hard to nail down where home is or find a people you can call your own” (p. 224) in Alabama.

In addition to graphic novels, comic books featuring superheroes play an important role in mapping how intersectional identities thrive in today’s youth culture. The popular Marvel Comics has pioneered diverse revisions of various prominent series including *Spider-man*, *Ms. Marvel*, and *Thor*. The first issue introducing the new Spidey, Miles Morales, an Afro-Latino, addresses the discomfort with the public’s reaction to a “black” Spider-man: “First of all, I am half-Hispanic” (Bendis, Pichelli, & Messina, 2011). *Guardians of the Galaxy* also made headlines when Brooklyn-based writer and graphic novelist Miranda-Rodriguez wrote a story for the series that highlighted both Indigenous and African heritage in Puerto Rican culture. *Guardians of Infinity #3* (McDaniels, Miranda-Rodriguez, Barberi, & Doe, 2016) centered on Groot, an Indigenous Taino god who, suffering from an apparent case of amnesia, had taken to life as a villain, wreaking havoc in the metropolis. When a wise Afro-Latina grandmother familiar with Indigenous history learns of Groot’s destructive behavior, she sets out to bring the gentle giant literally back to his roots. Likewise, Gene Luen Yang’s award-winning and honored graphic novels *American Born Chinese* (2005) and *Shadow Hero* (Yang & Liew, 2014), bring Chinese and other Asian Americans to the comic format. *American Born Chinese* demonstrates how Asian Americans are heterogeneous and how Asians are marginalized by the dominant white society in the U.S. In *Shadow Hero*, Yang & Liew create an origin story for the The Green

Turtle, the first Chinese superhero originally published by Blazing Comics in the 1940s; this narrative functions as a commentary on early U.S. multiculturalism.

These authors and illustrators engage in public pedagogy by repositioning the experiences of protagonists of color within popular discourse. The visual format of picture books, comics, and graphic novels presents new opportunities for readers to engage race and culture in familiar formats. However, visual representations of race also offer challenges when they are read uncritically. In terms of African American picture books, for instance, Gardner (2016) warns that “negative societal scripts about blackness can influence and limit interpretations of the visual rhetoric in African American picture books” (p. 4). Likewise, Schieble (2014) insists that readers must engage graphic novels like *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2005), not merely as a text about identity and self-acceptance, but also as a critique of persistent and historically racist representations of Asian Americans in U.S. media. Both Gardner (2016) and Schieble (2014) argue that readers need to develop a critical visual literacy when engaging visual representations of race and culture.

### **Entangled Histories: Historical Fiction, Memoirs, and Civil Rights**

Many historical fiction texts and memoirs featuring characters of color focus on civil rights movements. Capshaw (2014) explains that the policies of multiculturalism in the 1990s fostered the popularity of publications about civil rights movements. However, she warns readers and scholars to keep in mind how multiculturalism continues to inform how we might read these stories. In particular, we should question narratives with easy and celebratory portrayals of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement that denote progress for U.S. people of color:

In the face of simplistic versions of a racial nightmare in the early 1990s, civil rights books might permit (for some) a kind of denial of the real economic and social difficulties faced by children. They might present civil rights as a solved problem, a told story, easily accessed, compartmentalized, institutionalized, and dismissed. (p. 243)

Recently published memoirs and historical fiction have the potential to reveal to young readers that cultural communities have deeply entangled histories due to colonialism and their enduring struggles for civil rights. While it is important to acknowledge key moments in individual communities’ histories, it is just as crucial to note their intersections. Authors unsettle our understanding of history by constructing personal and complex historical narratives that challenge homogeneous characterizations of cultural groups and their histories.

For example, Jacqueline Woodson's (2015) memoir in verse *Brown Girl Dreaming*, which won the National Book Award, describes the author's experiences growing up as an African American in South Carolina and New York in the 1960s and 1970s, and becoming aware of Jim Crow laws and the Civil Rights Movement. Likewise, Rita Williams-Garcia's trilogy *One Crazy Summer* (2010), *P.S. Be Eleven* (2013), and *Gone Crazy in Alabama* (2015), which have all won the Coretta Scott King Award, follow three Black sisters in the late 1960s. These stories about family occur against the historical context of the Black Panther Party and the war in Vietnam. In addition, the series' last book reveals that some of the sisters' ancestors were from the Creek Nation.

Similarly, the interrelation between Latinx and African American history, particularly during the Civil Rights Movement, is something authors have stressed recently in historical fiction. For example, Duncan Tonatiuh's (2013) *Separate is Never Equal*, a Pura Belpré Award winner for illustration, narrates the story of Sylvia Mendez, the plaintiff in the landmark federal case *Mendez v. Westminster* (1946). This case took on the injustices of school segregation for Mexican children in California year almost a decade before *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). In the book, Sylvia's experiences with dirty school facilities and bullying by white children—"Go back to the Mexican school! You don't belong here" (p. 2)—uncovers an often forgotten story of U.S. civil rights. Tonatiuh's pre-Columbian style illustrations also centralize Indigenous Latinx narratives in order to tell the story. Likewise, the anthology, *The Afro-Latin@ Reader*, edited and compiled by Jiménez-Román and Flores (2010), provides a rich collection of primary and secondary texts suitable for young adult readership. This anthology suggests a helpful organization of the intersections between Latinx and African American cultures, including the Civil Rights Movement, public images and media, and the rise of hip hop.

*The (R)evolution of Evelyn Serrano* (Manzano, 2013) shares the story of Puerto Ricans in the late 1960s when the radical Young Lords Party, an activist group founded by Latinx youth inspired by the Black Panther Party, began their movement in Spanish Harlem. Fourteen-year-old Evelyn struggles with her place in this movement and with her role as a young, colonized person of color without a political voice. At the beginning of the story, although her full name is Rosa Maria Evelyn del Carmen Serrano, she insists that everyone now calls her Evelyn instead of Rosa because "it was the least Puerto Rican-sounding name I could have" (p. 8). However, when the Young Lords begin their activist demonstrations in her neighborhood, and when she

learns that her grandmother had been an activist in Puerto Rico, Evelyn experiences an internal revolution and joins the movement. During a march, she spots her father in the crowd. “‘How come you’re not home with your mother?’ he said. ‘Because I want to be here,’ I answered quietly. ‘Papi, this is important.’” (p. 122). She learns about Puerto Ricans’ heritage and develops a sense of pride in her history and appearance:

Well, first, Puerto Rico had Taino Indians, and then white Europeans came and they brought slaves from Africa with them, and that’s why we are such a big mixture of all those people, and some of us have dark skin, and some light skin, and some have kinky hair. (p. 153)

In the end, Evelyn reclaims her first name, Rosa, and her identity as a young Puerto Rican activist, an act of agency and resistance against assimilation.

The above narratives invite young readers to contemplate the U.S. Civil Rights Movement and the spirit of collaboration that existed between intellectual and cultural workers. However, to heed Capshaw’s (2014) advice of not reading the history of civil rights as a solved problem, the section that follows explores contemporary texts that expose the forms of racism and colonialism that persist for youth of color today, particularly African American and Native American youth, who continue to be located in the margins of society.

### **Intersectional Counter-narratives: Fiction, Poetry, and Anthologies**

Although in this article we explore new ways youth understand and express their identities, it is also important to examine books that document how young people of color experience and resist intersectional oppressions. Such narratives have the potential to reveal the multiple ways in which institutions such as schools, government, or police produce particular raced identities as marginal (Crenshaw, 1994; Collins, 1990). Collectively, these texts unsettle potential “moves towards innocence” (Tuck & Yang, 2012) that the historical texts discussed in the above section might facilitate. Instead, stories that uncover, document, and resist dominant narratives about social progress are crucial for understanding the social and systemic challenges youth of color continue to face.

### **Intersections of Race, Ethnicity, and Institutional Violence**

Many authors have taken up the experiences youth of color face when their racial and ethnic identities intersect with social and government institutions in marginalizing ways. A number of recently published books explore police violence and the shootings of young Black

men in the U.S. *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas (2017), which held the number one position as the *New York Times* bestseller for six months and continues to hold its place in the top ten a year later, follows sixteen-year-old Starr after she witnesses the fatal shooting of her childhood best friend Khalil by a white police officer. In the aftermath of the shooting, Starr has to navigate the contrast between what she knows about her friend and the disenfranchised neighborhood where she lives, with negative and often racist portrayals from news media, police officers, and classmates at her predominantly white and affluent private school. *How it Went Down* by Kekla Magoon (2015) weaves together multiple voices that attempt to reconstruct the events that led to the shooting death of a young Black man, Tariq Johnson, by Jack Franklin, who is White. Likewise, in *All American Boys* (Reynolds & Kiely, 2015), police officer Paul Galluzzo mistakes Rashad, an African American 16-year-old boy, for a shoplifter and beats him up for resisting arrest. The story follows the fallout in alternating chapters from Rashad's perspective and his classmate's, Quinn, a white varsity basketball player who witnessed and recorded the beating and whose guardian is Paul.

Along similar lines, Marino Budhos' companion books *Ask Me No Questions* (2006) and *Watched* (2016) follow the lives of Muslim Bangladeshi youth living in New York, after the attacks of September 11, 2001. *Ask Me No Questions* (Budhos, 2006) explores the U.S. government's crackdown on undocumented immigrants and requirement that Muslim men register post 9/11. Nadira's family stayed in New York to live long after their visas expired. When her father is detained and arrested at the U.S.-Canada border, Nadira must continue to act normally at school to avoid raising suspicions about their immigrant status. Although she is the youngest, Nadira takes on the responsibility to get her father out of detention. *Watched* (Budhos, 2016) is set in Queens, NY at the peak of government surveillance. Naem lives in a Muslim neighborhood that is under constant surveillance for terrorist activity. When Naem is caught shoplifting, the police give him the option to stay out of jail if he becomes an informant and spies on his relatives and neighbors.

### **Intersections of Race, Ethnicity, Language, Gender, and Sexuality**

*Yes! We are Latinos: Poems and Prose about the Latino Experience* (Ada & Campoy, 2013) shatters many regional, linguistic, racial, and cultural stereotypes that exist about Latinx youth. Monologue style poems reveal the various histories and narratives of each character who boldly claims a Latinx identity. For example, two characters describe their pride in Chinese and

Japanese heritage as descendants of large Asian populations in Central and South America: “Sometimes I get tired of explaining/ that while it’s true/ I’m Chinese,/ it’s also true I’m a Latina,/ a Latin American, a Guatemalan” (p. 73). When she makes a new friend, Michiko, she knows that she understands: “I knew that she has had to explain/ many times/ that although she is the granddaughter/ of Japanese grandparents/ Spanish is her first language” (p. 74). These poems gesture to readers the legacy of colonialism that has and continues to dislocate and relocate cultural communities. Other characters claim Jewish and Arabic heritage and describe speaking in Ladino, a mixture of Indigenous, Hebrew, and Arabic dialects and Spanish, displaying the limitless opportunities and collapsing of stereotypes about ethnicities and nationalities in the U.S.

Young adult authors also challenge static representations of gender for youth of color. For example, Torrey Maldonado and Adam Silvera challenge the macho “tough guy” personas present even the important works of earlier authors such as Piri Thomas and the Nuyorican poets. Maldonado’s (2010) *Secret Saturdays* emphasizes the plight of young men to display strength through a hard exterior which may sometimes prove destructive, and the need to express emotion and deal with struggles openly in safe spaces such as family and school without fearing the labels “punk” or “soft.” Similarly, Silvera’s *More Happy than Not* (2015) deals with stereotypes of race and gender through his portrayal of a young, light-skinned, gay Latinx male struggling with his sexuality. Aaron lives in a tough neighborhood where boys fight on a regular basis. When he meets Thomas, a boy from a neighboring community, Aaron begins to rethink the ways he and his friends interact: “I’ve been exposed to fighting my entire life, and I never really stopped to think that there were alternatives to being laid out” (p. 97). After a long conversation with Thomas, he asks, “I feel weird talking like this. Do guys do this kind of thing? Hang out and talk about love?” (p. 132). In these ways, Silvera presents an alternative model to youth for how they might perform masculinity.

Likewise, *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass* (Medina, 2014) tackles the intersections of gender and colorism in Latinx communities. The main character, Piedad “Pidy” Sanchez, is a light-skinned Cuban Dominican American who is read by schoolmates as a “gringa” or white girl because she has good grades and takes advanced classes. Pidy recalls, “It’s bad enough that when Coach Malone read out my last name in PE and the Guatemalan girls in back gave me weird looks, even though they should know better. ‘You Spanish?’ they asked. I

ignored them” (p. 6). Piddy is the target of bullying at her new school by other Latinas who undermine her for not fitting their perspective of a Latina.

In addition to challenging cultural expectations of gender, authors are also engaging contemporary expressions of sexuality in young adult literature. In *Tell Me Again How a Crush Should Feel* (Farizan, 2014), Leila is a 16-year-old Persian American girl. Her ethnicity, sexuality, and language intersect in ways that make her feel different from her peers and from her cultural community. She is afraid of “coming out” to her family because homosexuality is not accepted in her cultural community. Leila remembers that some family friends disowned their son because he is gay and no one talks about him anymore:

We found out through the Persian rumor mill that someone saw Kayvon kissing another guy at a college party... he had to come out to his parents. They didn't take it well.

I overheard Mom talking on the phone a couple of years ago about how she couldn't believe the Madanis kicked Kayvon out of the house... the Madanis still come to all the parties, and it's like Kayvon never existed. (pp. 99-100)

Leila has also not told her friends that she is a lesbian because, as a visible ethnic minority in a predominantly White and affluent school, she does not want to bring additional attention to herself.

Similarly, the characters in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (Sáenz, 2014) question their ethnic and sexual identities. Dante wonders whether, as the grandson of immigrants to the U.S., he is Mexican at all:

I mean, my dad's parents were born in Mexico. They live in a small little house in East LA and they speak no English and own a little restaurant. It's like my mom and dad, [who are a psychologist and a college professor], created a whole new world for themselves. I live in their new world. But they understand the old world, the world they come from—and I don't. I don't belong anywhere. That's the problem. (pp. 87-88)

When Dante tells Ari that he is gay, he further questions what that means for his ethnicity: “Do real Mexicans like to kiss boys?” (p. 273). The stories illustrate how expectations of heterosexuality that can create conflicts for LGBTQ youth of color.

The books discussed in this section allow readers to engage diverse representations of youth of color and to understand how identities intersect, and sometimes conflict, across individuals, communities, and institutions (Collins, 1990). These stories resist stereotypes about

youth of color by depicting characters that are embedded in heterogeneous cultural communities made up of individuals who perform their identities in varied ways. Critical readings of such texts can reveal to readers how youth of color, including U.S. born and immigrant youth, contend with social issues related to race, ethnicity, nationality, language, sexuality, and gender, and how definitions of these identities are sometimes contested within their communities or larger national and institutional contexts.

### **Alternative Realities and Futures: Speculative Fiction**

Authors of color envision youth of color in all their literary possibilities: from pictures and graphic novels, to realistic and historical fiction, or dystopian and speculative fiction, they firmly place youth of color in the literary imagination. Speculative fiction in particular unsettles deep-rooted social issues by acknowledging the role of colonialism in creating racial hierarchies and envisioning new realities—past, present, future, or alternate—in which youth of color draw on their ancestral knowledge as a source of power. These stories challenge the logics of colonialism, reclaim ancestral knowledge, and rearticulate cultural myths and folklores. Rather than merely serving as ancillary characters to a white protagonist, the youth of color in these books are embedded in strong, if sometimes flawed, heterogeneous cultural communities. Critical readings of such texts open ways to engage social issues that the established canon obscures.

In *American Street* (Zoboi, 2017), Fabiola, a newly immigrated Haitian girl adjusts to living in Detroit with her cousins. She draws on her culture—Haitian Vodou—as a source of strength to navigate this strange and sometimes dangerous city and to try find her mother, who was detained at the airport upon entering the U.S. Although Fabiola is a U.S. citizen by birth, she grew up in Haiti, and the differences between her and her cousins are remarkable. Where Fabiola is quiet and respectful of authority figures, her cousins are loud, tough, and defiant. The overarching message of the story, however, is not about the magical elements of Vodou or even the contrast between generations of immigrants; it is about a broken American dream and the harsh realities immigrants face when they seek a better life abroad and end up in social contexts that are just as challenging. In the “Author’s Note,” Zoboi (2017) explains that, “In Haiti, many girls dream of the freedom to live without the constraints of oppression. Yet more often than not, these girls and their families leave their home countries only to move to other broken and disenfranchised communities” (para. 3).

In *Shadowshaper* (Older, 2015), Sierra Santiago, a young Afro-Puerto Rican mural painter, must rely on the knowledge of both her African and Indigenous ancestors to fight against the main antagonist of the novel: gentrification.

The place Bennie and Sierra used to get their hair done had turned into a fancy bakery of some kind... The Takeover (as Beenie had dubbed it once) had been going on for a few years now, but tonight its pace seemed to have accelerated tenfold. Sierra couldn't find a single brown face on the block. (pp. 81-82)

As her Brooklyn neighborhood is slowly taken over by trendy, hipster coffee shops, Sierra learns that her culture is also under attack. Someone is killing shadowshapers—those who have the ability to infuse paintings, music, and art with ancestral spirits. Sierra learns that her Haitian friend, Robbie, is also a shadowshaper, and they have much in common. Robbie explains his tattoo of a Native American man:

“That’s a Taino, Sierra.”

“What? But you’re Haitian. I thought Tainos were my peeps.”

“Nah, Haiti had ‘em too. Has ‘em. You know...” (p. 126)

As Robbie teaches Sierra how to develop her shadowshaping skills, and as they fight against forces that would destroy their cultures and neighborhood, Sierra discovers that she is much more powerful than she initially believed. Older (2015) seems to suggest that connecting with the past is a way of salvaging the present and the future.

Joseph Bruchac’s *Killer of Enemies* (2013), the first book in a series, brings Abenaki and Apache culture to a post-apocalyptic future where the Cloud has destroyed all technology. Lozen, a seventeen-year-old hunter, has the skills to kill the genetically altered monsters that threaten those who survived the apocalypse. Lozen credits her skills to growing up poor: “It was lucky for me in particular that my youthful skills included such (pre-cloud) anachronistically useless pursuits as hand-to-hand combat, marksmanship, tracking, and wilderness survival at a time when the wilderness itself was barely surviving” (pp. 21-22). Those in power keep Lozen’s family hostage in exchange for Lozen to keep them safe. What they do not know is that, in addition to her hunting skills, Lozen has powers that reach back to her Native American heritage—she has the ability to hear and see the thoughts of other people and animals, something she keeps secret and uses to her advantage against those who try to control her.

Nigerian American author Nnedi Okorafor similarly draws on Nigerian and Igbo folklore to construct magical and fantasy worlds in *Zarah the Windseeker* (2005) and *The Shadow Speaker* (2007). Her novels depict alternate and dystopian worlds drawn from her multiple visits to Nigeria—Nigerian culture, folklore, geography, and language ground these fantastical and futuristic tales. *Zarah the Windseeker* (2005) is a utopian fantasy set in another dimension, while *The Shadow Speaker* (2007) is set in a dystopian future that extends from the tensions in our current reality. Both novels present fourteen-year-old female protagonists of color who are shaped by their marginal status in their communities because of their supernatural abilities—shadow speakers can see through darkness and hear people’s subconscious thoughts; and windseekers can fly. These novels challenge readers to reflect on ecological (dis)harmony, the contradiction of using of violence to achieve peace, the marginalization of difference, and ultimately, not only acknowledging current social dysfunctions as shaping our collective futures, but also recognizing the usefulness of imagining alternatives, no matter how unlikely.

Finally, Malinda Lo includes Asian and lesbian characters in her speculative fiction. *Ash* (2010) is a retelling of Cinderella in which Ash falls in love with the King’s huntress. Similarly, *Huntress* (2012), the prequel to *Ash*, follows two young huntresses, Kaede and Tesin, who are on a mission to save the kingdom; they fall in love in the process. The story includes details inspired from the I Ching. Lo’s books feature an important move in young adult literature in that the characters’ sexuality is not the conflict of the story.

In their extensive study of children’s literature, Bradford, Mallan, Stephens, and McCallum (2008) explain that authors of youth literature “are less inclined to be daring in their imaginings of radically different futures. Such conservatism is ... attributable to the propensity for authors to operate within ideological frameworks accepted as normal in dominant social groups” (p. 184). However, the authors note that youth literature that explores colonial histories and its impact on contemporary life tends to articulate the need to envision a future that values collaboration over power—a cross-cultural relationship that would not duplicate current social tensions and dysfunctions (p. 78). Thus, speculative fiction written by authors of color is an important tool to engage difference critically, to discuss past atrocities, and to envision future possibilities.

### **Conclusion: Mirrors, Windows, and Lenses**

Placing youth of color's experiences "at the center of analysis" (Collins, 1990, p. 224) and across various communities of color can yield new insights on the dominant discourses that shape identities. As well, engaging narratives that reflect the heterogeneity of youth of color and their varied experiences across cultural and geographical contexts provides a basis for resisting and refuting dominant narratives. The texts we explore in this article mirror critical theories and pedagogies that allow communities to resist essentialist identities upheld by colonialism. In addition, these narratives unsettle typical categorizations when it comes to intersecting identities.

Although our discussion draws largely from award-winning publications, we are in search of even more books that can serve as mirrors for youth of color and their lived experiences in ways that balance aesthetic and literary quality with relevant social, cultural, and political contexts. However, we want to caution against narratives that solely focus on social issues to avoid creating a "single story" (Adichie, 2009) that characterizes communities of color as caught in a traumatic history that they can never overcome. We—scholars and teachers of youth literature—also need more books that can serve as windows for youth of color to envision their identities and experiences in nurturing, restorative ways. We need celebratory narratives that acknowledge a colonial history but view it as source of strength that can help readers imagine new possibilities for a diverse society. Speculative fiction might be the genre that offers the most promise for this vision, as these stories are celebratory but linger on the complexities—they offer no easy answers and refuse universality and assimilationist narratives. In their treatment of past, alternate, and future worlds from the perspectives of youth color, these texts offer unique opportunities to imagine alternatives to current social arrangements.

In addition to mirrors and windows, we also need lenses through which we might more aptly perceive the nuanced and complex identities of youth of color in literature. Indeed, unsettling identity discourses from essentialist or colonialist logics requires engaging narratives and critical theories simultaneously. For example, in her introduction to postcolonialism as literary theory, Appleman (2015) shares an anecdote of an 11<sup>th</sup> grade teacher who manages to teach Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* without deeply engaging the historical and political contexts that shape the narrative. This anecdote echoes our own experiences with students and teachers who eschew the unsettling aspects of stories in favor of performing comfortable and familiar analyses focused on universal themes and symbols. Although we discuss the potential of

youth literature to unsettle established identity discourses in this article, we also want to warn readers against relying exclusively on the texts to reach critical insights. As Capshaw (2014) writes, “Ethnic children’s literature is not sociological and it should not be treated that way” (p. 251).

Instead, we urge readers to embrace the unsettling over the familiar by reading with and through critical lenses. Theories developed by scholars of color (i.e. Critical Race Theory, Black Feminist Theory, Postcolonial and Decolonial theories) have the potential to make more visible the historical and political contexts that shape a story. For instance, as Appleman (2015) argues, a postcolonial lens resists universal readings of literature and instead supports “interpretations based on new understanding of political and historical contexts and the cultural identities they acknowledge for the people they represent” (p. 92). Thus, critical theories such as the ones we used to frame our discussion are essential lenses to unsettle how we might read and understand literature by authors of color.

In closing, we want to acknowledge some limitations to our study and directions for further research. We focused primarily on books set in the U.S. and written by American authors of color, in part because our analysis here posits that U.S. curriculum and traditional pedagogical approaches tend to mask the U.S.’s position as an empire. However, a number of books set outside of the U.S. also explore a variety of cultures, nationalities, and histories that unsettle assumptions about contemporary social issues. For example, Padma Venkatraman writes fantasy and historical fiction set in India. Her novel *Climbing the Stairs* (2010) explores the intersections of gender, culture, social class, and nationality in British-occupied India in the 1940s. Similarly, Shyam Selvadurai’s *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* (2007) explores the intersections of gender, sexuality, and culture in Sri Lanka in 1980. In short, we believe that books set in regions of the world outside of the U.S. provide diverse perspectives from which to consider the aftermath of colonialism in a global context and might offer valuable insights for (re)considering U.S. multicultural frameworks.

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