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Windows and Mirrors: Selecting Multiethnic Young Adult Fiction to Increase Adolescent Engagement with Academic and Cultural Literacy

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Windows and Mirrors: Selecting Multiethnic Young Adult Fiction
to Increase Adolescent Engagement with
Academic and Cultural Literacy

Caryn Kunz Lesuma

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Windows and Mirrors: Selecting Multiethnic Young Adult Fiction to Increase Adolescent Engagement with Academic and Cultural Literacy

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Current scholarship in literacy education underscores the inefficacy of standardized education in public schools, particularly for minority students. At the same time, a longstanding lack of understanding between the various culture groups that live in the United States often results in minority groups that are either stereotyped, misunderstood, or viewed as Other. Both of these issues can be traced to the literature that students read in school, which focuses on “classic” literature—often synonymous with “white” literature—that excludes minority narratives. While minorities struggle more with “academic literacy” (the ability to read and write in an active, reflective manner), there is also a pressing need to educate all students in “cultural literacy,” or a knowledge of and appreciation for difference in worldview, culture, and opinion.

One possible solution is a more effective implementation of multiethnic young adult literature in the classroom. Careful consideration of specific cultural texts can help minority students connect positively with literature, increasing student engagement with academics. Providing educators, librarians, and parents with a framework for selecting literature that begins to address this issue is a critical first step in empowering minority students with emotional and intellectual development as well as providing mainstream students with alternative perspectives that establish common ground, develop social awareness, and reduce stereotyping across groups.

This thesis examines literacy and education studies to develop criteria and rationales for selecting books that appeal not only to minorities, but to readers from outside those groups. These criteria provide useful guidelines for educators and librarians in selecting multicultural novels for young adults that (1) act as “mirrors” of relatability to boost self-esteem and foster a love of reading in minority youth, and (2) provide “windows” into other cultures that promote greater cross-cultural respect and understanding. After setting up a theoretical framework that lays out the challenges and benefits to this approach as well as criteria for selecting these novels, this paper provides analyses of several books that meet these criteria as well as a booklist of additional titles.

Addressing these issues within the context of young adult literature is crucial to the development of self-assertive, productive adults who value themselves and the different individuals that they interact with on a daily basis; on the other hand, failure to address these issues early perpetuates a cycle of marginalization and distrust that is difficult to break in the adult world.

Keywords: multicultural education, multiethnic literature, cultural literacy, academic literacy, young adult literature

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Nick Jr. cartoon characters Dora the Explorer and her cousin Diego represent a successful—and beloved—representation of Latin@¹ culture and language in U.S. popular television. To a lesser extent, the cartoon Kai-Lan has also captured the preschool set with her Chinese American heritage and Mandarin vocabulary. While these shows' successful crossovers into mainstream consumption mark important milestones in diversifying U.S. media offerings for children, they remain singular among dozens of dominant-culture television programs.

Multicultural and multiethnic literature for children and young adults in the U.S. reflect a similar trend. Data from the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Cooperative Center for Children's Books indicates that of 3,400 books evaluated by the Center in 2011, less than 10 percent (8.8%) were written by and/or about ethnic minorities. While this number is an improvement over numbers in the past—in 1985, when CCCB first began collecting data, less than 1 percent (.07%) of books published for children were by and/or about ethnic minorities—it's still alarmingly disproportionate to the percentage of minorities in the U.S. population, which is around 37% (CCBC). Author Suzanne Morgan Williams asks of these findings, "What does this mean for the almost 40 percent of US children who come from different backgrounds?...Do Caucasian kids come to believe the whole world is like theirs?" (18). Williams's questions underscore the issue: in the absence of diverse voices, minorities feel alienated (Metzger and Kelleher 37; Lewis and Del Valle 323) and dominant-culture readers lack exposure to alternate worldviews (Beach 92; Stewart and Atkinson 2). The consequences of these two outcomes reach far beyond inefficacies in classroom performance, although that is affected, too; even more

alarming is the low self-esteem it engenders in minorities and a lack of tolerance for difference evidenced in all youth.

The United States has a long and painful history when it comes to the treatment of racial and ethnic minorities. Today, a continued lack of cultural understanding by both mainstream culture and many minority groups often results in representations in media and literature that stereotype those with different backgrounds. Often, minorities are viewed as romantic “Other”—for example, as “noble savages,” “gangsta rappers,” or the “model minority”—rather than as contemporary individuals with diverse families and lifestyles. While many factors contribute to this paradigm, these misrepresentations often reinforce historically incorrect ideas about others that are perpetuated on both sides of the majority/minority divide.

Even more damaging is the *absence* of representation of these groups in literature that guarantees a continued perpetuation of stereotypes by failing to reverse them (Metzger and Kelleher 40). In many cases, this absence leads to low self-esteem and societal alienation in minority youth that limit their assertiveness and emotional development, a consequence that reaches beyond the walls of the classroom; according to Lewis and Del Valle, poor self-image negatively affects minority students’ ability to succeed in a variety of settings because they feel marginalized. Consequently, “when the experiences, perceptions, and relationships students value are not acknowledged, they often learn that literacy is an exclusive, limiting activity that diminishes their efforts to construct expanded identities” (310). In other words, because they do not see their experiences reflected in books, minority students tend to view reading as restrictive and/or irrelevant rather than as a tool to help them reach their full potential as individuals.

Admittedly, many educators have worked to help dominant-culture students learn about and appreciate other cultures for a long time. However, such exposure is often reductive of a

culture's worldview and presence in contemporary society; in many cases, this cultural "celebration" focuses on history and other traditionalized notions of dress, customs, and food (Sleeter 10-13). When contemporary members of a particular culture do not conform to this romanticized, Western view, "those individuals who do not possess the expected set of characteristics are often marginalized" by those outside the culture (Lewis and Del Valle 310). "Multicultural" units in schools thus work as a double-edged sword: while they acknowledge difference, their focus on tradition fails to acknowledge minority perspectives as they currently exist, perpetuating stereotypes and marginalization (Metzger and Kelleher 36). This can further contribute to minorities' disengagement with academics, and in turn privilege dominant-culture students by validating their experiences. It may even lead to Williams's fear that white students will believe that "the whole world is like theirs" (18) and/or begin to develop attitudes of superiority.

Unfortunately, one of the best places to broadly address this two-pronged issue—school—is underutilized. Current scholarship in literacy education underscores the inefficacy of teaching to standardized testing benchmarks in public schools (Darling-Hammond 246; Sleeter 12), and the achievement gap between whites and minorities is particularly glaring when it comes to reading and writing (United States 40-41). The literacy crisis isn't reserved for minorities, however. While minorities struggle more with what I will call "academic literacy," there is also a pressing need to educate all students—minority and majority alike—in "cultural literacy" as it pertains to worldviews and experiences beyond their own (Bishop vii-viii; Wartski 49; Crowe 124; Cai). I will refer to academic literacy as the ability to read and write in an active, reflective manner, and cultural literacy² as a knowledge of and appreciation for difference in culture, worldview, and opinion.

While there is no single solution to a problem this complex, one way to begin closing the gap in both academic and cultural literacy is through the use of multicultural young adult (YA) literature both within and beyond the classroom. Careful consideration of specific cultural texts can help minority students connect positively with literature, allowing educators, parents, and librarians to introduce additional texts in a less-alienating context (Herz and Gallo 25). These same texts can help individuals outside specific minority experiences move beyond simple recognition of difference to understanding “what makes those cultural groups what they are: beliefs, values, traditions, ways of life, etc” (Stewart and Atkinson 3). This solution has been suggested repeatedly by multicultural scholars and educators for decades (Bishop vii-viii; Cai; Nieto; Wartski 49), but is difficult to implement successfully.

One reason why YA literature isn't often utilized in high school English courses is that its benefits are not understood well enough to justify its use (Wadham and Ostenson 9). One advantage of YA literature is that it is written expressly for adolescent audiences, so it specifically connects to their life experiences and creates an engagement with the story and content that may not occur in books written for adults. In fact, Guthrie et al. argue that personal engagement with literature is the strongest factor that contributes to individual reading achievement in school (196). Herz and Gallo argue further that students often aren't developmentally ready to engage overly “literary” writing right away—particularly if they are already reluctant or disengaged readers. Instead, they should be given high quality YA books that engage them directly in order to help them “bridge” the gap into adult and classic literature (18-20).

Because YA literature can provide adolescents with good quality, engaging reading that is developmentally appropriate, it is an excellent vehicle not only for fostering a love of reading,

but also for introducing other cultures. In fact, Stewart and Atkinson argue that it is more appropriate to view multiethnic YA as “ethnic” literature first—as a “doorway for entry to understanding another culture, an entry to understanding another way of viewing the world”—with secondary consideration given to the age group for which it was written (2). This makes it an effective tool for improving both academic and cultural literacy in adolescents because it engages reluctant minority readers with self esteem-boosting literature; it also provides privileged white readers with narratives that legitimize the experiences of people from other cultures.

This paper will explore some of the challenges in overcoming literacy deficiencies and locating appropriate multiethnic YA books. I will then look at literacy and education studies to develop criteria and rationales for selecting books that will appeal not only to specific minorities, but also to readers outside that group. These criteria will focus on ways that books can (1) act as “mirrors” of relatability to boost self-esteem and foster a love of reading in minority youth, and (2) provide “windows” into other cultures that promote greater cross-cultural respect and understanding. After setting up a theoretical framework that lays out the challenges and benefits to this approach as well as criteria for selecting these novels, I will provide suggestions for several books that meet these criteria as well as a booklist of additional titles (see Appendix). While I will focus on multiethnic literature in this paper, the same guidelines can be applied effectively to multicultural literature that addresses issues of gender, religion, sexuality, and disability.

Academic Literacy Challenges

One of the main arguments for access to more multiethnic literature in the classroom posits that its absence negatively affects academic literacy rates in minorities. The issue is that

many children and teens fail to relate to the reading they are asked to do in school because they do not see themselves in assigned literature. As a result, they fail to interact positively with reading, and by extension, education in general (Guthrie et al. 196).

In some cases, this disengagement leads to open hostility towards reading and education (Guthrie et al. 205), a trend that may contribute to lower scores on standardized tests. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the gap between white and minority group reading scores—excluding Asian/Pacific Islanders³—closed slightly in 2011, but a wide disparity remains. In the assessment, white eighth graders scored an average of twenty-five points higher than black students and twenty-two points higher than Hispanic and Native American/Alaska Native students (NAEP 40-41). A breakdown of reading proficiencies by race/ethnicity reveals low numbers of proficient or advanced minorities and alarmingly high numbers of minorities in the basic or below basic range (see Table 1).

Table 1

Eighth Grade Reading Assessment Scores by Race/Ethnicity, 2011

	Below Basic	Basic	Proficient	Advanced
White	15%	42%	38%	5%
Black	41%	44%	14%	1%
Hispanic	36%	45%	18%	1%
Asian/Pacific Islander	17%	36%	39%	8%
Native American/Alaska Native	37%	41%	20%	2%

Source: United States, Dept. of Educ., Inst. of Educ. Sciences, Natl. Center for Educ. Statistics.

Reading 2011: National Assessment of Educational Progress at Grades 4 and 8. US

Dept. of Educ., Natl. Assessment of Educ. Progress. 2011. Web. 25 Nov 2012.

While a broad range of factors (including socioeconomic status, school funding, teacher training, school culture, and family culture) contribute to these disparities in scores, this continued gap in academic literacy achievement suggests that minorities are consistently failing to engage with literature in the classroom.

Simply changing the literature curricula to increase engagement for minorities, however, presents a challenge to U.S. educational infrastructure. Much of the nation's current standards-based testing curriculum is based on the idea that "a high school diploma should represent a common currency nationwide" ("Ready or Not" 4), a benchmark of achievement that signifies a basic level of competence regardless of where the diploma is earned. Burroughs and Smagorinsky discuss how pressure to perform well on exams leads to reductive instruction that focuses on memorization of forms and genres rather than on improving student thinking (179). In English classrooms, this means a hyper focus on "classic" literature—often synonymous with "white" literature—and formulaic writing such as the five paragraph essay, both of which emphasize memorization and speed during testing rather than engagement with ideas and thoughtful response. Unfortunately, the pressure created by the accountability systems used to enforce these standards has been shown to have particularly adverse effects on the academic literacy of disadvantaged and minority students, many of whom do not graduate because they either fail the benchmark tests or drop out (Darling-Hammond 253).

These findings underscore a need for literature that legitimizes the experiences of minority students. They also suggest that the readers who might ostensibly connect most with multiethnic literature—minorities themselves—often aren't reading at all. It follows that providing these non-readers with stories that legitimize their experiences has the potential to help them engage with literature and improve literacy rates. In fact, studies have demonstrated that the

use of multiethnic literature in schools helps minority students to improve academic performance in areas of literacy, test-taking, and attitude toward learning (Gay 625; Okoye-Johnson 1269).

The first step in beginning to alleviate the academic literacy crisis is to move away from standardized English curricula toward more culturally inclusive teaching and reading materials.

Educators in urban areas and districts with high percentages of minority students are emphasizing a need for contextualized teaching tailored to the needs of diverse learners and communities rather than standards-based instruction (Camangian 460; Boyd 455). Fenice Boyd argues that multicultural literature should be integrated across the curriculum and through multiple subjects, emphasizing that multicultural topics “are not an aside of education, curriculum, schools, and society but rather, for many, a lived experience” (456). Incorporating multiethnic literature more organically into school curricula has the potential to mitigate self-esteem and engagement issues in minority students in order to improve their academic—and by extension, personal and professional—success. It has the added benefit of legitimizing their experiences for students (both white and other minority) with little or no knowledge of their culture.

Consequences for Cultural Literacy

Well-documented studies and increasingly vocal educators seem to suggest that multiethnic YA literature is most beneficial in addressing the academic literacy crisis (Boyd; Gay; Burroughs and Smagorinsky). However, exposure to diverse texts is equally important for youth whose lived experience is outside that of a particular minority group. To be clear, it is important when talking about cultural literacy to avoid white/minority or majority/minority binaries; while we usually think of the white majority as needing exposure to difference, minority youth can also benefit from exposure to other minority narratives. Because minority

communities can often be insular, it is crucial that minority youth learn from the experiences of other minority youth. For example, what can a Mexican American teen learn from the experiences of a Korean American or biracial African American youth? What common ground do these youth have with a Navajo teen living on a reservation? It is also important to retain diverse white narratives in contextualized urban curricula to minimize minority stereotyping of all whites as privileged or completely outside of minority experience.

One of the benefits of using diverse YA literature to increase cultural literacy is that it helps to establish common ground among teens from diverse backgrounds. Chris Crowe argues that because many issues of growing up are universal across cultures, “it is in these coming-of-age stories where students can discover that even though their circumstances may differ, their essential concerns about life do not” (125). Finding common ground in experiences of alienation, rites of passage into adulthood, and experiments with love and friendship help adolescents to view each other with sympathy and an increased understanding that allows them to communicate more effectively. Diverse YA literature’s ability to bind universal teen experiences can also contribute to education’s goal for a “common currency” in terms of cooperation and contribution to society. By improving self-esteem and understanding of difference, adolescents can become primed to work together as citizens toward common goals. Adults with high self-esteem are not afraid to advance new ideas, and those with respect for others are more welcoming of such ideas. Because it teaches students to legitimize varied experiences, multiethnic YA literature fosters individual thinking that is more open to creative problem solving and welcoming of culturally-based skill sets.

Another benefit of providing teens with diverse narratives is that it helps to develop their social awareness. Because of the insular nature of many communities in the United States,

individuals within a specific community are often unaware of or insensitive to the struggles of others. Similarly, a focus on entertainment and popular culture has resulted in young people with an alarming lack of knowledge about public affairs, both domestic and international (Wolk 667). Steven Wolk advocates teachers' use of multicultural YA literature in the classroom "to awaken their students' consciousness to the world and help them develop the knowledge and inspiration to make a better world, from local to global" (665). While narrative-based accounts of current/historical events and issues should be considered a supplement to history and social studies classes, literature is a crucial intersection for engagement with these issues; readers connect with narrative on a personal level through characters and plot tension often unavailable in history or social studies textbooks. Engaging young people with the stories of struggle and triumph both at home and abroad helps to give them the civic awareness they will need as they develop into voters, leaders, and decision makers.

Finally, ethnically diverse literature that challenges stereotypes helps to reduce marginalization and feelings of superiority in more mainstream cultures. In a meta-analysis of thirty multicultural education studies, Okoye-Johnson found that the use of diverse instructional materials in school improves students' attitudes towards those belonging to other racial and ethnic groups (1267). This research demonstrates that multiethnic literature is one of the best tools for exposing students to diversity; without this exposure to alternative worldviews and cultures, adolescents' "narrow-minded notions and prejudices might remain with them into adulthood" (Crowe 125). In an increasingly polarized political and cultural climate, there is an immense need for open-minded individuals with access to a diverse set of problem solving skills. Exposing all adolescents to a variety of experiences and worldviews through multiethnic narratives is a crucial first step in fostering the development of individuals with these qualities.

Clearly, the stakes are high. So why aren't we doing more to provide our youth with multiethnic narratives? Part of the problem stems from an absence of quality multiethnic YA literature, but every year marks an increase in the number of available titles. The next section explores some of the varied challenges to implementing multiethnic YA in the classroom, including reasons for limited access to texts and educational concerns that discourage their use.

Challenges to Accessing Multiethnic YA Literature

Part of the reason for the dearth of multiethnic literature is that there just aren't that many authors writing multiethnic narratives for children. Many large publishing houses and organizations such as the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators are working to address issues of quantity in the multiethnic literature market by supporting diverse literature and the authors who create it (Gilton 89; Williams 20). The Children's Book Council also recently formed a Diversity Committee consisting of representatives from many of the largest publishers in the U.S. to raise awareness and interest in multicultural literature. In addition, minority-specific book awards such as the Coretta Scott King, Pura Belpre, and others highlight excellent books written by and about ethnic minorities each year.

Despite these efforts, it will take time for such initiatives to affect national publishing trends. There are, however, increasing numbers of small regional presses devoted to publishing multiethnic literature, and many of the most diverse titles can be found on their shelves (CCBC). Unfortunately, most of these presses lack access to mainstream consumer outlets, and their offerings rarely disseminate to wide audiences. While these presses are limited in their ability to market and mass-produce ethnic books, they do represent an important step in providing more narratives of ethnic diversity in literature.

Another positive characteristic of smaller, ethnically-focused publishers is that they are able to publish a wider variety of ethnically diverse books. Stewart and Atkinson claim that one of the drawbacks of large publishing houses is that they often require “a compromise of ethnic content and style” that strips a narrative of its cultural impact (3). Native American author Joseph Bruchac (Abenaki) agrees, claiming this as one of the reasons there are so few culturally significant Native American texts: “There are numerous Indian authors who have publishable manuscripts but cannot get their foot in the door because publishers are looking for what they are familiar with—which is the stereotyped, romantic non-Indian view of Indians” (38). Unfortunately, this results in books that reinforce stereotypes and replace more authentic narratives.

A related debate that could be contributing to fewer multiethnic books being published questions authors’ abilities to write about cultures outside their experience (Fox and Short 11). Minority writers are often resentful of outsiders who attempt to tell authentic stories about their culture. Jacqueline Woodson questions why such authors would want to tell stories outside their experience in the first place: “Some say there is a move by people of color to keep whites from writing about us, but this isn’t true. This movement isn’t about white people; it’s about people of color. We want the chance to tell our own stories, to tell them honestly and openly” (45). For Woodson and many other writers, having minorities write about minority experience is the only way to portray viewpoints that are culturally authentic and to avoid inaccuracies and misrepresentations. While these are valid concerns, the net result of this philosophy potentially decreases diversity by limiting the number of stories that can be told; no single person or group can write the varied and limitless experiences of a culture. Compounding this problem is the fact that minority writers already represent a tiny fraction of the profession, and their numbers as

currently constituted are not enough to overcome the dearth of multiethnic literature on the market.

Other writers, like Kathryn Lasky, argue that “a writer can have all the credentials in terms of ethnic background and culture but can still fail if he or she does not have the aesthetic heat. Such heat is not the product of ethnicity. It transcends ethnicity. It is in the realm of the artist” (91). In other words, viewed from this perspective, if a book is researched thoroughly and sensitively enough, an outsider—as an artist—*can* write meaningful stories about other cultures. Despite Lasky’s assertions, the net result of this ongoing debate about ownership of cultural narratives is fewer ethnically diverse books; because they feel prohibited from writing them, many writers from outside a specific culture shy away from writing diverse narratives at all.

These issues of awareness of and access to multiethnic literature are only part of the reason teachers don’t use more multiethnic texts in the classroom. Despite an increase in well-circulated multiethnic literature, it is often not used in schools for a variety of reasons. Gay cites a “strong resistance to diversity” in U.S. education (615), a condition compounded by pressure to teach a predominantly white, middle-class canon to increase test scores (Burroughs and Smagorinsky 179). Another problem is that many preservice teachers aren’t trained in diversity, and because many teachers in diverse areas are white—only 17% of elementary and secondary school teachers nationwide are minorities (Boser 1)—they do not believe there is a need to understand it (Gay 615). Similarly, a lack of teacher education also results in diverse literature being “added on” as a separate unit rather than integrated in the curriculum (Boyd 456). Because authentic multiethnic YA literature accurately reflects the difficult experiences of some minority youth, content such as offensive language, sex, discrimination, and violence may also make it

unpalatable for administrators. There are still other cases in which school district policies and a focus on standards inhibit its use.

Pressure to teach the Common Core State Standards—educational standards advocated by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and National Governors Association and adopted by 45 states—often limits teachers to using “Exemplar Texts,” even though those texts are only recommended samples (“Appendix B” 2). Similarly, teaching to the canon is often easier because canonical texts are cheaper, in the public domain, and more likely to be available in schools. Recent scholarship by Wadham and Ostenson demonstrates that books outside these exemplar texts can be utilized effectively using Common Core Standards (11), but existing pressures and attitudes towards both young adult and multiethnic literature will take time to overcome.

Finally, educators who attempt to use multicultural literature in their curricula often experience pushback from non-minority readers (Beach 69). There are several reasons why young adults often resist reading multiethnic narratives. One is that the books challenge worldviews developed within dominant-culture communities (Beach 70). Because majority youth have been taught to think about minority groups in a certain way, literature that contradicts those worldviews is commonly dismissed or rejected. Further, narratives of oppression and discrimination are often uncomfortable for dominant-culture students because they are “[unwilling] to see themselves as oppressors or as participants in a larger pattern of injustice” (Ruzich par. 3). Such narratives are equally uncomfortable for minority students because they feel singled out. Many students also resist the study of multicultural literature by ironically citing a lack of relevance to their lives and/or future (Ruzich). As a result of these readers’ reluctance to engage with multiethnic literature, many award-winning books never appear on bestseller or teen

choice booklists that are determined largely by mainstream readers. Consequently, the books don't get enough exposure for readers to even know that they exist.

Despite these complex challenges to integrating multiethnic YA literature in the classroom, it is critical that administrators, teachers, parents, and librarians work together to locate and purposefully select books that will enhance students' academic and cultural literacy. I have included a list of criteria and rationales for choosing books that will meet these objectives, in addition to examples from current books that demonstrate these criteria in action.

Selecting Multiethnic YA

In spite of the disproportionately low numbers of books being published by and/or about minorities, there are some excellent multiethnic books for young adults that cover a wide range of life and cultural experiences. Subgenres for immigrant narratives, historical fiction, urban experiences, interracial relationships, and mixed-race identity only begin to scratch the surface; consequently, navigating through current offerings to find appropriate books that engage students from both ends of the spectrum (minority and non-minority) can be a daunting task. In this section, I will explore five criteria for selecting multiethnic YA literature: (1) storytelling, (2) universal young adult themes, (3) cultural authenticity, (4) social justice issues, and (5) self-empowerment. I will also provide brief synopses of books that fit each criterion. These criteria were chosen based on requirements in scholarship concerned with increasing self-esteem and engagement to improve academic literacy (Lewis and Del Valle; Belgarde et al.) in addition to scholarship concerned with increasing cultural literacy through exposure to difference (Crowe; Bishop; Lowery and Sabis-Burns; Wolk; Metzger and Kelleher).

For this paper, I limited my book selection based on genre, publisher, and publication date. While the criteria that follow can be successfully applied to multiple genres with minority

protagonists (including historical fiction, immigrant/international narratives, fantasy/science fiction, and others), I chose to focus on contemporary realistic fiction set in the United States because it most closely reflects the varied experiences of teens living in the U.S today. I also limited my study to books published by large national publishing houses rather than small local or regional presses because books from large publishers are more likely to (a) be mass-marketed and widely accessible and (b) require greater scrutiny for compromises in authenticity. Finally, I limited the publication dates to books published within the past five years. Even with these constraints, there was an overwhelming number of books, so I admit that my list is in no way comprehensive; it represents only a sampling of available texts. The only exception to these constraints comes in the area of Native American YA novels, which were so limited that I expanded the publishing constraints to ten years.

“Aesthetic Heat”: is it a Good Story?

Obviously, the most important criteria of any novel is that it must *tell a good story*. All of the cultural accuracy and authenticity in the world will fall flat for young adults already reluctant to engage with these books if nothing interesting happens to the characters in them. Reading a flat story could prevent nonreaders from picking up another book, and too much focus on cultural details can also alienate readers from different backgrounds. Another danger of uninteresting stories is that they can inadvertently suggest to both minority and mainstream readers that the particular culture portrayed is itself uninteresting, or that individuals from that background lack value or the ability to produce stories worth reading. It’s also important to be aware that many books with Lasky’s “aesthetic heat” written by authors from outside a culture may contain cultural inaccuracies, stereotypes, or even outright racism (91).

An example of a stereotyping book written by an outsider is *The Indian in the Cupboard*, which, despite popular reprinting since its first edition in 1980, portrays Native Americans as unintelligent and dependent on whites. However, books like Charles R. Smith, Jr.'s *Chameleon* combine great storytelling with cultural authenticity: inner-city Los Angeles teen Shawn deals with gang pressure, urban basketball culture, and a broken family in culturally authentic dialogue and setting. At the same time, Smith creates plot tension through the difficult decisions Shawn faces as he weighs his future goals against his current friendships and love interest.

Universal Young Adult Issues/Themes

Choosing a good story means finding a book with strong main characters who struggle with universal young adult concerns of family, friendship, love, belonging, self-esteem, and perseverance. While issues of race can be central to the story, they need not be; in many cases, choosing a story that focuses more on issues that affect all teens—regardless of race or ethnicity—engages both minority and outside readers. These characters should not be romanticized as “Other” or as victims in need of saving. Instead, they should portray real individuals with real human problems and the agency to overcome them.

A good example of a strong protagonist can be found in *Rain is Not My Indian Name*, which opens with Native American protagonist Cassidy Rain Berghoff contemplating that “the next day was my fourteenth birthday, and I’d never kissed a boy—domestic-style or French” (Smith 1). Rain’s love interest soon dies in a car accident, and the book focuses on her personal journey of recovery. Because issues of love and loss are faced by teens regardless of race, social status, or gender, Rain’s struggle as a human being gives non-Native Americans a portrayal of a contemporary Native American who is very different from the stereotypical noble, disappearing race most often portrayed wearing buckskin and feathers.

Coe Booth's Tyrell character provides a similar perspective in *Bronxwood*. An inner-city African American teen in New York City, Tyrell makes money as a DJ to support his mother while his father is in jail. He also has a brother in the foster care system. While it might be easy to typecast Tyrell as a hoodlum who flouts the law, Booth instead portrays a youth who struggles to maintain familial and romantic relationships, worries about money, and tries his best to stay out of trouble despite pressure from all sides. Despite their vastly different settings, books that focus on universal young adult issues can resonate with both minority and majority readers. In addition to portraying "other" ethnic individuals as real people with real issues, the sameness of those issues across communities fosters the sympathy and understanding required for effective collaboration and cooperation.

Cultural Authenticity and Avoiding the "Other"

In order to fight stereotypes and marginalization, multiethnic YA books should demonstrate that for most minority adolescents in the United States, daily life bears little resemblance to the "over-generalized, arrested forms of representation [that] perpetuate the perception that...people still look and act the same as they may have hundreds or even thousands of years ago" (Metzger and Kelleher 36). *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* portrays struggles faced by some Native American teens today. Rather than face a bleak future on the Spokane Indian Reservation, teen cartoonist Junior enrolls in an all-white school in a neighboring town. Alexie expertly uses wit and candor to illuminate the realities of life on a contemporary reservation, undermining stereotypes of the "noble savage."

Cara Chow dispels the stereotype of the Asian model minority in *Bitter Melon*, the story of Fei Ting's resistance to her Chinese immigrant mother's pressure to overachieve in school and become a doctor. Instead, Fei Ting pursues a talent for debate and a forbidden love interest.

These stories demonstrate that “cultural authenticity” does not mean adhering to traditions of a bygone cultural era but rather the honest telling of specific ways of life in a contemporary setting. By maintaining a true authenticity of experience in their writing, Alexie and Chow break negative stereotypes by focusing on issues that relate to a wide audience of adolescents.

Social Justice Issues

Without exposure to the challenges facing other individuals and groups, students outside a specific culture may never feel the need to help other groups or to collaborate with groups that share similar difficulties. The use of diverse YA literature can teach adolescents social responsibility in order to help them “[understand] and [act] to improve the many problems confronting the United States, especially involving culture, gender, economic class, and sexual orientation” (Wolk 667). In other words, failure to expose youth to books that validate the experiences of marginalized groups reinforces the current cycle of mistrust, stereotyping, and isolation. An example of a book that tackles these issues from both insider and outsider perspectives is Julia Alvarez’s *Return to Sender*. After his father is injured in a farming accident, Tyler’s family must hire undocumented Mexican immigrants in order to keep their Vermont farm. Tyler’s friendship with Mari, one of the worker’s daughters, gives readers a chance to examine the issue of illegal immigration from both sides of the ideological divide.

Another way to choose books that tackle social justice issues is to look for characters in multicultural novels that encounter one or more forms of institutional racism and/or stereotyping. This can foster sympathy in same-culture readers and empathy in outside readers while establishing the discrimination as widespread rather than incidental. In a study exploring why white students resist engaging with multicultural literature, Richard Beach found that students recognized incidents of racism at school and in the books they read but did nothing about it

because they were reluctant to challenge the status quo (75-81). Beach suggests that choosing literature portraying discrimination as societal rather than isolated instances of individual prejudice can help students “begin to vicariously experience the impact of institutional racism. This may then lead to some self-reflection on their own perspective of white privilege” (88). Choosing literature that fosters reader empathy with minority characters is thus an important aspect in choosing multiethnic literature for readers outside a specific minority group.

Brian F. Walker’s *Black Boy, White School* provides a good example of this when young African American Anthony Jones is sent from inner-city Cleveland to an all-white prep school in rural Maine. He is stereotyped repeatedly by everyone at the school—students, teachers, and administrators alike—as being a New Yorker, a basketball player, and a dangerous individual. The problem is compounded by an influx of Somali immigrants to the town, making race and racism even more of an issue. Indian American Samar in *Shine, Coconut Moon* also experiences widespread racism after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the U.S. Of Sikh heritage, she and her family are targeted when her turbaned uncle Sandeep comes to visit. While these books validate the experiences of isolated minorities, they can also provide perspective for majority readers as to the difficulties of maintaining an identity in the face of widespread misunderstanding and racism.

Self-empowerment

Perhaps the most important characteristic to look for in multicultural novels has less to do with plot and theme, centering instead on character. Because many minorities also face socioeconomic marginalization in addition to racial/ethnic stereotyping, strong protagonists who make decisions that create positive outcomes out of their negative situations can provide a successful road map for disenfranchised youth (Louie and Louie 52). While a narrative that

places a character in a situation with universal young adult struggles helps to make the story relatable to readers, it is the choices that the protagonist makes that help readers “to counter the combined debilitating forces of emotional and economic violence” frequently faced by minority children and teens (López 220). In this sense, Fei Ting’s choice in *Bitter Melon* to attend college out of state against her mother’s wishes serves as an excellent example of a protagonist removing herself from a negative situation in order to succeed.

Similarly, Marcelo’s choice to participate in “the real world” after a life of sheltered living in *Marcelo and the Real World* provides a narrative of a minority adolescent who makes difficult decisions in order to better his circumstances. Like Fei Ting, an important aspect of Marcelo’s self-empowerment is his ability to make these decisions despite pressure from a parent; he has the courage to do the right thing, even if it means damaging his relationship with his father. These stories emphasize the attitude that “children must be given the tools to act with awareness and vision...to make productive sense of [their] own struggle” (López 222). Providing minorities with examples of self-empowerment allows them to believe that they can improve their own negative situations, even when those situations involve loved ones. It also provides majority readers with a view of an empowered minority who undermines stereotypes.

Booklist

In addition to the titles I’ve shared throughout this section, I’ve compiled a list of additional titles that demonstrate many or all of these five criteria (see Appendix). It is important to note that the novels listed in this booklist have varying levels of explicit content in terms of language, sex, and violence; educators should be aware that each book should be reviewed ahead of time to determine whether it might be appropriate for a particular classroom setting.

Implications

Statistics, empirical studies, and anecdotal evidence all point to a critical need for more multiethnic YA literature both on the market and in school curricula. A focus on increasing both academic and cultural literacy through the use of this literature engages minority adolescents with narratives of validation and cultural difference results in enhanced self-esteem, engagement with learning, and increased critical thinking and problem-solving ability (Lewis and Del Valle; Gay). At the same time, they foster greater tolerance for and cooperation among outsiders (Okoye-Johnson). While I focus much of my argument on the importance of teaching multiethnic literature in the classroom, it is important to note that teens should be encouraged to read these texts outside the classroom as well. However, introducing these texts in an educational setting is crucial: without direct intervention, minority students who are disengaged from literature and academics in general will rarely pick up a book on their own. Similarly, non-minority students who are often resistant to multicultural texts may never encounter one without the encouragement of a teacher.

Despite the levels of complexity inherent in the politics of multiculturalism and the multiple difficulties in implementing it more effectively, it is crucial that we help adolescents engage with versions of themselves as well as encounter difference through literature. Because it is written expressly for adolescent audiences, YA literature is an effective vehicle for this positive initial engagement with reading. Providing educators, librarians, and parents with a framework for selecting literature that begins to address this issue is a critical first step in empowering minority students with emotional and intellectual development as well as providing dominant-culture students with alternative perspectives and sensitivity to difference. My approach justifies the benefits of utilizing multiethnic YA in the curriculum and outlines specific

criteria in the selection of books that will engage both types of readers, making it relevant and useful for educators, librarians, and parents. The demands of today's diverse world require greater levels of academic and cultural literacy than ever before; not only does increased literacy it have the potential to lessen prejudices and misconceptions within audiences outside a particular culture, but it can help to improve literacy and self-esteem in young adults within a specific culture by providing them narratives and characters that they can identify with and learn from. To that end, disseminating multicultural YA literature more widely is a valuable way to introduce young people to a variety of worldviews and to pique their interest in further reading.

Using these texts to foster academic and cultural literacy has the potential to build a foundation for lifelong confidence, success, and cooperation. Addressing these issues early on is crucial to the development of self-assertive, productive adults who value themselves and the different individuals that they interact with on a daily basis; on the other hand, failure to address these issues perpetuates a cycle of marginalization and distrust that is difficult to break in the adult world. As our world becomes more and more integrated and globalized, we no longer have the luxury of insular communities within our nation. By promoting both academic and cultural literacy in our youth, we are providing them not only with critical thinking ability, but also a tolerance of difference that is essential to successfully navigating the challenges that globalization presents. Reluctant readers on both sides of the social divide—mainstream and minority—can learn valuable lessons from literature and each other. We just need to get them the right books.

Notes

1. The @ symbol designates a move away from gendered language in Spanish (words ending with “o” are masculine, while words ending with “a” are feminine). While this practice is a helpful way to abbreviate the phrase “latino and/or latina,” it is also used frequently to promote gender neutrality (Demby).

2. My definition differs from the “cultural literacy” used by E. D. Hirsch in 1987 to overcome poor reading comprehension and test performance in minority students exacerbated by a lack of mainstream cultural knowledge. Hirsch advocates teaching minorities mainstream culture in order to improve academic performance (Hirsch); my use of the term rejects Hirsch’s Western-centric assimilation paradigm, advocating instead an understanding of and appreciation for diversity by all individuals, regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status.

3. According to NAEP, the difference between reading assessment results for Asian/Pacific Islander students and white students has been statistically insignificant since 1992 (NAEP 40). Partly due to cultural pressures that emphasize educational achievement, the negative effects of misrepresentative or absent narratives on Asian Americans do not always manifest in academic settings. However, these effects are apparent in social and psychological arenas (Lee).

Appendix

Sample Booklist by Ethnicity

African American

- 50 cent. *Playground*. New York: Razorbill, 2011. Print.
- Barnes, Derrick. *We Could Be Brothers*. New York: Scholastic, 2010. Print.
- Booth, Coe. *Bronxwood*. New York: Push, 2011. Print.
- Davis, Tanita. *A la Carte*. New York: Knopf, 2008. Print.
- Draper, Sharon M. *Out of My Mind*. New York; Atheneum, 2010. Print.
- Flake, Sharon G. *Pinned*. New York: Scholastic, 2012. Print.
- Goodman, Shawn. *Something Like Hope*. New York: Delacorte, 2010. Print.
- Grant, Christopher. *Teenie*. New York: Knopf, 2010. Print.
- Johnson, Angela. *A Certain October*. New York: Simon, 2012. Print.
- LeFlore, Lyah B. *Can't Hold Me Down*. New York: Simon, 2009. Print.
- Maldonado, Torrey. *Secret Saturdays*. New York: Putnam, 2010. Print.
- Moses, Sheila P. *Joseph*. New York: Simon, 2008. Print.
- Moses, Sheila P. *Joseph's Grace*. New York: Simon, 2011. Print.
- Myers, Walter Dean. *The Cruisers*. New York: Scholastic, 2010. Print.
- Smith, Charles R. Jr. *Chameleon*. New York: Candlewick, 2008. Print.
- Walker, Brian F. *Black Boy White School*. New York: Harper, 2012. Print.
- Woodson, Jacqueline. *Beneath a Meth Moon*. New York: Paulsen, 2012. Print.
- Wright, Bil. *When the Black Girl Sings*. New York: Simon, 2008. Print.

Asian American

- Chow, Cara. *Bitter Melon*. New York: Egmont, 2010. Print.
- Headley, Justina Chen. *Nothing But the Truth (And a Few White Lies)*. New York: Little, 2007. Print.
- Hirahara, Naomi. *1001 Cranes*. New York: Delacorte, 2008. Print.
- Ly, Many. *Roots and Wings*. New York: Delacorte, 2008. Print.
- Meminger, Neesha. *Shine, Coconut Moon*. New York: McElderry, 2009. Print.
- Thompson, Holly. *Orchards*. New York: Delacorte, 2011. Print.
- Yee, Lisa. *Warp Speed*. New York: Levine, 2011. Print.

Native American

- Alexie, Sherman. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. New York: Little, 2007. Print.
- Bruchac, Joseph. *Night Wings*. New York: Harper, 2009. Print.
- Leitch Smith, Cynthia. *Rain is Not My Indian Name*. New York: Harper, 2001. Print.

Yeahpau, Thomas M. *X-Indian Chronicles*. New York: Candlewick, 2006. Print.

Latin@

Alvarez, Julia. *Return to Sender*. New York: Knopf, 2009. Print.

Budhos, Marina. *Tell us We're Home*. New York: Atheneum, 2010. Print.

de la Peña, Matt. *Mexican White Boy*. New York: Delacorte, 2008. Print.

Hijuelos, Oscar. *Dark Dude*. New York: Atheneum, 2008. Print.

Johnson, Louann. *Muchacho*. New York: Random, 2009. Print.

Pérez, Ashley Hope. *What Can(t) Wait*. Minneapolis: Carolrhoda, 2011. Print.

Sáenz, Benjamin Alire. *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*. New York: Simon, 2012. Print.

Saldaña, René Jr. *The Whole Sky Full of Stars*. New York: Lamb, 2007. Print.

Stork, Francisco F. *Marcelo in the Real World*. New York: Scholastic, 2009. Print.

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