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Searching for Identity: Connecting Students to Young Adult Literature
in the Classroom Through Language

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Young adult literature largely influences the cultures and the lives of young people; often these popular young adult novels become well-known as they are made into movies and are in high demand. These novels are not just for young adults; these texts can be read at any age and have accessible themes that many people can relate to. However, in this research, young adult literature will be discussed in terms of how these novels affect children, mostly from ages ten to eighteen, as many of the characters in these texts are a similar age to them. Young adult literature (YA lit) is not just any book that would be read in a secondary education classroom. Novels that are considered classics, like perhaps *Lord of the Flies* or *Oliver Twist*, might be about children, but they are either not written for children and therefore not considered young adult literature. While older classics of course have literary merit, and much can be learned from them, this research will focus primarily on more recently published young adult literature that is more currently relatable to adolescents' lives and specifically written for teenagers. Literature does not have to be relatable, because the reader will most likely learn something either way. But for teenagers specifically, who often do not enjoy reading and are questioning their own sense of identity, YA lit can serve as a powerful tool for helping students understand themselves at a time in their lives when they are trying to figure out who they are.

The question of what has "literary merit" is one that is often intertwined with the definition of the literary canon. There is a debate that the literary canon should be expanded or should not even exist at all; the existence of the literary canon implies that certain literary works, mostly by white, male authors, have been deemed worthy enough to be taught in almost every classroom. The idea of "literary merit" is a complex one because one might learn something new from reading anything, but that does not automatically mean that every book or poem has literary merit. Arguably, meaning can be gained from any piece of writing if a person has analytical

skills or if the text is properly contextualized. Similarly, there is a difference in language connotation when someone says, “a book” versus “literature.” The word literature itself has indicated perhaps a higher art form than any piece of writing. If the claim is that there is a difference between any book and what is considered literature, this by definition indicates that the word literature is meant to exclude. For example, if a person is in a library and looking in the 800s section of nonfiction (800s being in reference to a section of the Dewey Decimal System), that person would find poetry and fiction books in the “literature” section. The Dewey Decimal system is often used in public libraries, by both libraries and the general public than use the library resources. Although the Dewey Decimal System is mostly used to categorize nonfiction, there is a section that indicates literature. This means users of the Dewey Decimal System are separating so-called “literature” from the other books in the fiction section and placing them in a designated area, amongst the nonfiction. Often in the 800s, one would find works by Oscar Wilde, F. Scott Fitzgerald, playwrights like Arthur Miller, and of course William Shakespeare with his own separate Dewey Decimal Number, 822.33. As important as librarians are in terms of helping students read, librarians are not the ones who decide what has literary merit, especially when it comes to an English classroom. However, it is evident that the books what are considered “literature” have an influence on the classroom curriculum and state standards.

While any type of reading is valuable for students, from comic books to short stories to nonfiction to YA lit, there are certain texts with literary merit that should be read in classrooms so that students can learn. It could be argued that literary value is determined by publishers, who decide what gets to be published, and therefore what people get to read. However, that has more to do with what they believe will sell to consumers, not what is believed to be important literature. Teachers might have a choice in what they are teaching their students, but it truly

depends on the school itself and the school district, as teachers might have a set curriculum that they cannot change. However, teachers may be able to argue for the inclusion of a certain text, again if they believe it has literary value and that students will learn from it. Jonathan Culler argues that “‘literary excellence’ has never determined what is studied. Each teacher does not pick what he or she thinks are the ten greatest works or world literature but, rather, selects works that are representative of something: perhaps a literary form or a period of literary history” (Culler 48). For a teacher to say that a book, poem, play, or short story has literary merit and deserves to be taught in a classroom, they might look at themes of the text, the time period, use of language, use of literary devices, and what students will learn from it. Of course, the literary canon, the concept of literary merit, and the connotation of the word “literature” being exclusive means that some authors are left out and have not been studied. Shakespeare has most likely been studied from every possible angle, so while there are many different types of literary theory studies—Marxist, feminist, cultural studies, etc.—many authors who are not as famous do not have as many studies written about them. When people in power are deciding which works have literary merit, that means that historically, the literary canon and the 800s section in libraries is often full of white male authors, and often excludes female authors, authors of color, and LGBTQ authors. It is important to view these authors as mainstream rather than alternatives or add-ons to a curriculum.

Changing the definition of what people believe should be read and what is considered “literature” is important because it makes more stories accessible and opens more doors for authors. This research is arguing that young adult literature has literary merit and should be considered as important as other forms of literature. Bildungsroman is a German word that means a novel about the moral and psychological growth of the main character, specifically in

the formative years of the character's life. Bildungsroman novels have been taught in classrooms for many years as a classical form of literature, but young adult literature is much different from the bildungsroman novel and is not taught as often. Roberta Seelinger Trites states that "the popularity of the traditional bildungsroman with its emphasis on self-determination gives way to the market dominance of the Young Adult novel, which is less concerned with depicting growth reverently than it is with investigating how the individual exists within society" (Baxter 7).

While the bildungsroman novel is more about growth and self-determination, the young adult novel is defined more as an individual's relationships with others and how that person exists in society. That is not to say that the character does not grow or change in some way in a young adult novel, but it is more about how that person exists in their culture and their community.

While YA lit might have some coming-of-age elements, like showing a large amount of character development, often young adult literature is about surveying a moment in an adolescent's life. And while that person may grow and change, the novels are more about learning something about themselves, how their actions affect others, and less about truly becoming closer to adulthood. The intersections between language, culture, and identity come up frequently in some young adult literature, as characters begin to think about their family, their background, and who they want to be. While identity is often explored thematically in various genres of literature, identity exploration is at the crux of YA lit simply because of the nature of growing up; stories that are full of struggle, questioning, and growth. Socialization, confusion, conforming, peer pressure, family pressure, and performing identity are all daily issues in young adulthood, but they are issues that persist throughout life. Coming-of-age is a time between childhood and adulthood, usually from about ages ten to eighteen, where children often feel that

they are stuck in the middle; feeling too old to be a young child, but not old enough for the freedoms and responsibilities of adulthood.

The use of language is connected to identity because all language varieties serve as ways to talk about oneself and try to connect with other people in a way that they would understand. The language that a person speaks can give a clue as to their background, or maybe that they learned another language. While this research will consider how non-English languages and English dialects are used in young adult literature and why that is important, it will also look at the different ways that language can be defined, such as body language, social cues, gender representation, dialects, and code-switching, among others. By broadening the definition of languages, it makes way for the acceptance of languages and truly makes languages fluid, which is connected to the fluidity of identity. Much like how languages change over time, with new words added and changes to how people speak, identity can change over time in a similar way, with how a person chooses to express themselves. YA lit that treats language and identity as fluid gives children the space to feel comfortable in their identities and may validate some of the changes and feelings that they are experiencing. The classroom can become a space to think about language and identity, and why they are important, especially because they relate to what students are experiencing.

Young adult novels are often labeled as quick reads or easy reads; people might think they are easy because it is the dialogue that adolescents are used to, since it is dialogue that they hear every day. In comparison to some of the older classics like perhaps *Oliver Twist* for example, the syntax and diction are different and may seem more complicated to contemporary readers. Students often struggle through reading the language of Shakespeare, which might be viewed to them as almost another language altogether since it is Middle English. Language

should be used by the people in whichever way that they choose, however there are those who try to regulate English. Language should be viewed as descriptive; that is to say that descriptive grammar shows how language is actually used by the people, not dealing with whether the language use is good or bad. By looking at newer and popular novels, it is evident that there are changes happening in how people use language. For this research, books that were considered more popular and with literary value were chosen; for example, these novels have been on the *New York Times* bestseller list, or movies have been made about those books, etc. The criteria for choosing books for this project was that each book chosen has different representations of linguistic diversity, such as code-switching, cultural storytelling, social norms, and non-English languages. Other reason for choosing these books was that most, if not all, of these books could be found in a public library. It is important that these books are accessible for everyone, but especially students. It is important to acknowledge that there are dozens and dozens of other YA lit books that could have been chosen for this project, so this is not a definitive list. These novels were not chosen to tokenize characters or to show just one experience from a certain demographic, but each novel shows linguistic diversity in a different way that will be accessible to students. Since these chosen texts are mostly popular young adult novels, many of these books are built into the fabric of societal culture for many young adults. This research is looking at what is popular with students, what they are choosing to reach for on the library shelves, and how taking what students are reading, and teaching it in the classroom can help students learn about themselves. Calling these novels easy reads invalidates the experiences of many children who might see themselves represented in these novels. Young adult novels are giving students a space to see their stories represented.

Identity and language are connected because people use language to find the right words for their feelings and their self-determination. Language is constantly changing, which is important because new words are being developed for things that might have needed to be changed. It also means that there are now new words for ideas and identities, which creates space for growth and acceptance. Words have power and word choice is important. In some cases, people are not willing to change their language to help or understand someone else, which could be harmful. However, labels for identities are often changing; phrases for identity might change in the future and might not be used in the same ways that they are now. This research about young adult literature in the classroom intends to open up a conversation, not to tell students to read a certain book just because they might have similar experiences to the characters. Students do not have to identify with the characters that they read, but they might identify with a theme, a particular language, or it could remind students of an experience that they or someone they know has had. Some may learn something about a character's struggles and experiences, even if the students do not feel that they can relate. However, these YA lit books are not to serve as token experiences for these cultures and communities. It is important to understand when choosing books about identity, community, and culture, that one character does not represent the experiences of all people from that background because that can lead to tokenization or lead readers to believe that there is only one way to be of a certain background. Not only should novels talk about race and societal injustices, but literature should do this in a way that is not about a "white savior" perspectives; that is, a white people feeling like they need to save a person from a marginalized community for the white person's own personal benefit. Looking at some of the new young adult novels and how they can be taught in the classroom leads to thinking about

why certain texts are chosen for the literary canon and perhaps to trying to break down the exclusivity of the canon.

Before analyzing YA lit novels on their use of language and identity, it is necessary to look at how these two concepts are defined in literature and how they are connected. Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguistic of the early twentieth century, defined language as “a system of signs and the key fact is what he calls the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign,” which therefore states that language is a combination of sign and meaning. (Culler 57). However, because there are so many languages around the world and so many dialects within them, language in itself is a system of differences, creating identity for those who speak the same language and contrast between other language systems. Language creates connections, but also creates different identities for people. In the essay “American Indian Geographies of Identity and Power: At the Crossroads of Indígena and Mastizaje,” Sandy Marie Anglas Grande states that language connects to the “experience of multiplicity, relationality, and transgressions as they relate to identity” (Grande 220). It is therefore impossible to separate language and identity. There is a fluidity in both language and identity that is important, especially when thinking about how those two things are seen in literature. Grande goes on to define identity as “situated as one of the core struggle concepts of critical pedagogy, where the formation of self serves as the basis for analyses of race, class, gender, and sexuality and their relationship to the questions of democracy, justice, and community” (Grande 219). It is necessary to be discussing all of these topics in classrooms, since they are so relevant in the lives of students. Students should be given the freedom to explore both their language and their identity, and the classroom can be a starting point for that.

Student choice in the classroom is a way of listening to how students learn, their needs, and their interests. Letting students choose what they want to read gives them voice in the classroom. However, this can be difficult because of the Common Core State Standards as well as funding for books. There is an assumption that when giving students a choice of what they want to read, they will choose the easiest book to read. This might be true for some students, especially when it comes to choosing a summer reading book, but students are more likely to pick a book that challenges them or piques their interest. George W. Norvell wrote “to increase reading skill, promote the reading of habit, and produce a generation of book-lovers, there is no factor so powerful as interest” (Cart 23). When teachers get in the habit of talking about books in the classroom, even just any general books that the students are not reading in class, the students have a better understanding of what options are out there for books. English teachers might not get every single student to like reading or to start reading in their free time, but it is still important to emphasize reading in their free time and helping the students find books that they might like, and they can recommend to each other. In an English class, there is often a question of interest: should students be interested in what they read in the classroom? Does it matter if a student likes a text or not, as long as they learn from it? A teacher might ask a student for their thoughts on a book, or what they understood from the reading for homework, and a student will often say “I don’t really like this book.” While the teacher was looking for an observation or an analysis, the student’s first thought might be to if they like the book or not. It is important for students to learn the difference between an evaluative and analytical comment for literature. Students do not have to necessarily enjoy all of the texts that they are reading in class, as long as they are learning something from them. Literary analysis is much different from enjoyment, and they are usually not related concepts. However, if the students are in fact reading books that they

enjoy, or at least is more relevant to their experiences, they might make more connections to the text and be able to understand it better because they have had similar experiences themselves. In 1967, young adult author of *The Outsiders* S. E. Hinton wrote “teenagers today want to read about teenagers today” (Cart 23). Although this quote is from about fifty years ago, it is still true to this day: teenagers have always wanted to read about themselves, and they will always want to.

Young adult literature might seem like a new trend that has gained popularity in the last ten or so years; however, YA lit has a long history throughout the 20th century that coincided with the very idea of what it meant to be a teenager. In the book *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, author Michael Cart states that “until World War II, the term young adult-like its ostensible synonym teenager-was scarcely used at all” (Cart 3). This is because children seemed to become adults overnight when they entered the work force, which during the 19th and early 20th century, could be as early as ten years old. Until about the 1940s, there were only children or adults; the idea of an age group in between childhood and adulthood is not even a century old. Therefore, before the 1940s, the concept of young adult literature did not exist either because there was no need for books about an age group that, at that time, theoretically it did not really exist. Of course, there were books about the difficulties of childhood, like perhaps Charles Dickens’ *Oliver Twist*, but none that specifically discussed the difficulties of the young adult experience. It is believed by Cart that “it was in 1942 that the new field of writing for teenagers became established,” specifically with the novel *Seventeenth Summer* by Maureen Daly (Cart 11). *Seventeenth Summer* is about a seventeen-year-old girl named Angie who gets asked out on a date by a basketball star; however, their fates are uncertain as they will both be starting different lives in the fall. When books for children and young adults were released, they were

incredibly gendered and only reinforced strict gender roles for children, much like the social norms during their time period. Since female authors were often not as popular as male authors, female students would read about the experiences of boys and men in classes, but male students would not often read about the experiences of women. In contrast, popular YA lit today covers a wide range of topics like vampires, dystopian worlds, and romance. The novels chosen for this research are mostly realistic fiction, with some inclusion of dystopian stories.

When thinking about the connections between a reader and a text, and how the background of that reader affects their reading experience, it is essential to look at the work of educator and literary theorist Paulo Freire. Whenever someone picks up a book, they are carrying with them their own entire life experience to the page of the novel, which makes a reading experience different for each person. This affects how a person reads, and how they read affects how they see the world. Therefore, a student's background, culture, and prior knowledge all impact how they learn and connect with literature. When a novel is taught to a class, each student will get something different from a text because each student has had different life experiences. As Freire states in his book *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*, "Reading does not consist merely of decoding the written word or language; rather, it is preceded by and intertwined with knowledge of the world" (Freire and Macedo 29). Not only is it important for students to understand language and meaning, but literature is also connected to the world outside of the text and the world that students experience every day. Reading is impossible in a vacuum, because reading and analysis mean taking an understanding of the world and applying it to dissecting a reading. Paulo Freire's theory of "reading dangerously" indicates that reading should challenge a person's way of thinking, and that reading, and education are powerful enough that all people deserve access to education. This also means reading books that are

considered banned or challenged, specifically because these books might change the way a person thinks. *Conscientização* is a Portuguese word meaning critical consciousness, which is another educational theory developed by Paulo Freire that engages learners to question the world around them. People who are critically conscious recognize issues embedded within society and work on addressing these issues through action and dialogue.

Literature often gets people to think differently on a topic or teaches the reader something, and when thinking about a change in societal understanding and questioning community, it may be useful to think about Bobbie Harro's research on the Cycle of Socialization and the Cycle of Liberation. Harro's research should be applied to young adult literature because sometimes a person might come across an idea in these novels that might make them question themselves and their upbringing. The Cycle of Socialization is made up of many parts: the beginning of the Cycle is First Socialization, usually with family or whomever is raising a person. Then it moves to Institutional and Cultural Socialization, which could be school, a religion, friends, and other social groups. Then Enforcements and Results, which would be the enforcement and regulation of social norms. The breaking out point in the Cycle of Socialization is Direction for Change, which indicates breaking away from the community beliefs and social norms. In the Cycle of Socialization there is a binary of either staying in the cycle and possibly having children to keep the cycle going with the same ideas and beliefs, or the second option of breaking away. This connects to the Cycle of Liberation, which begins with Waking Up. This is the moment when something occurs causing a person's values no longer match their community values. Next leads to Getting Ready, then Reaching Out and Building Community. Since a person left their old community, or perhaps was forced out for having different beliefs, they will want to find a new community. The next three steps are Coalescing,

Creating Change, and Maintaining. This would mean creating social change and making a difference in the lives of others, while also maintaining these beliefs. These cycles can be applied to identity because identity realization can sometimes mean breaking away from the social group that raised a person and having to find a new community. This does not necessarily mean moving away from family, but it could lead to some separation, which is part of growing up and moving on. Not knowing something or being wrong, whether in the classroom or in life, is always an opportunity for learning and for growth.

When thinking about Harro's Cycle of Socialization, it is necessary to make connections to family because it is often families and communities, the socialization aspect, that people are staying in or leaving. In young adult novels, characters are shown in connection to their families, given that the main characters are often children, but also because these characters are thinking about their identities in terms of how that relates to their upbringing. As previously mentioned, young adult literature can be focused on growing up, but it is mostly focused on relationships and community. The novel *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, by Benjamin Alire Sáenz tells the story of two friends as they navigate the summers of adolescence in 1980s El Paso and attempt to learn more about themselves and their families. The narrator Aristotle Mendoza, who goes by Ari, and his new friend Dante Quintana are both Mexican-American and are faced with family expectations. Ari is more comfortable with being Mexican-American, while Dante says that he does not feel Mexican and is embarrassed by his family heritage. Ari and Dante both question what it means to be a "real Mexican," because they know that they are Mexican and must deal with the stereotypes and racism from society (Sáenz 88). They are dealing with the question of what it means to identify as American. Ari and Dante often use Spanish with their families, and Spanish is interwoven in the text with English. This act of

going back and forth between languages is a reality for many multilingual people. Dante's father is an English professor, and Ari says about Mr. Quintana, "I'd never met a Mexican-American man who was an English professor. I didn't know they existed" (Sáenz 24). Ari's mother tells him that it is a wonderful thing that Mr. Quintana is an English professor because she never had a single Mexican-American professor when she was in college (Sáenz 99). Mrs. Mendoza knows that there are most likely Mexican-American students in Mr. Quintana's classes, and that seeing that representation in their teaching is important for the students because she never got to experience that.

Historically, the United States education system has sought to erase the languages and cultures of immigrants and Native Americans in an attempt to Americanize everyone, which is incredibly harmful to how students see themselves and their families. This is evident in the boarding schools that Native Americans were forced to attend, which later became the model for immigrants. In the article "Honoring and Building on the Rich Literacy Practices of the Young Bilingual and Multilingual Learners," author Mariana Souto-Manning states that "by valuing students' cultures, teachers can engineer bridges between their experiences and academic standards" (Souto-Manning 263). This is why it is important to value the backgrounds and experiences of students and create lessons that show this value as well; students might feel more connected to what they are learning.

Aristotle feels pressure to live up to his name, both in terms of being named after his grandfather, while also having the same name as the famous philosopher. He renames himself Ari as an attempt to create his own identity separate from the expectations of others. Perhaps another text to teach along with *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* would be the vignette from *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, where Esperanza discusses

how she was named after her grandmother, and how the children at school make fun of her for her name. Ari feels that, in order to understand himself, he must understand his brother, who is in prison, and get his family to acknowledge his brother's existence and humanity. As Ari becomes closer friends with Dante, he is able to let go of some of his anger because of Dante's openness and freedom. Part of "discovering the secrets of the universe" (Sáenz 43) is that Dante and Ari have better understandings of themselves and how they fit in the world. When Dante tells Ari that he is in love with him, Ari takes a long time to realize that he is in love with Dante in the same way. Dante came out to Ari first, but Ari had hidden his feelings for so long that he had not even realized that he was having them. When Dante gets attacked for being gay, it brings societal homophobia to the forefront; while their parents might accept their sons, the rest of society might not feel that way. Ari eventually comes to accept this aspect of his identity with love and support from his parents.

In the *Education Week* article "How to Tell a Different LGBTQ Story in Schools" the author writes about how to discuss LGBTQ issues in the classroom while being respectful and making sure students feel safe. Bullying is a large issue in many middle schools and high schools, and many LGBTQ folks often face bullying because of their identity and gender presentation, so talking about LGBTQ identity in the classroom normalizes those identities and makes it okay to talk about them. The article interviews teachers on why this is an important issue and how they accomplish this goal. One teacher stated that "talking about lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans issues in schools means talking about friendship, family, and disappointment" ("How to Tell a Different LGBTQ Story in Schools"). These identities are not isolated; the experiences of LGBTQ students often intersect with family and friends in their lives and being aware of that is important. Only talking about LGBTQ identity in a health class, if students even

get a non-heterosexual sex education, tells those students that their identities are only about whom they have relationships with. School is a community. Therefore, students should feel supported in their community and have the freedom to talk about issues that they face. In an English classroom, this does not mean talking about LGBTQ characters only if there is one such character in a book, which might be rare as curriculums are often focused on heterosexual characters. This means listening to students and providing a safe space in the classroom. Another teacher who was interviewed in the article stated “all these young people and all these teachers already have these very personal, intimate relationships with LGBTQ issues. And not because they themselves are necessarily gay or lesbian or trans” (“How to Tell a Different LGBTQ Story in Schools”). When thinking about *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* and Ari and Dante’s love for each other, both platonically at first and then romantically, it is important to have these discussions about LGBTQ identity in the classroom with help from this article.

Part of the intersections of language and identity is the language of gender and sexuality, as well as having the linguistic tools to come out if one chooses to. Becky Albertalli’s novel *Simon vs. The Homo Sapiens Agenda* tells the story of Simon, a teen who is at risk of being outed as gay by a classmate and therefore must deal with expectations and possible judgements from others. Not only is his identity at risk of being exposed, but also the identity of his email pen pal, Blue, whom Simon confides in because Blue is also gay. This novel deals with who gets to own a person’s story. Coming out should be an experience that that person owns and can do on their own terms and should not be taken away from that person. While Simon doesn’t want to hide the fact that he is gay, he is also faced with the uncertainty of what others will say to him. There is a language to coming out as well—whom to tell, how to say it, word choice, and how

people will respond. When it comes to speaking about identity, there is privilege in who gets heard and who gets ignored or silenced. Even the words for how we identify change and identities are always in flux. Words like gay, queer, non-binary, and even the LGBTQ acronym, have changed meaning in the past and will probably change in the future as new words are used. When talking about his parents and their expectations of his behavior, specifically before they know that he is gay, Simon states, “It’s like they have this idea of me, and whenever I step outside of that, it blows their minds” (Albertalli 54). Simon feels that he cannot change for fear of disappointing others, but that he is limited by who he can be by other people trying to put labels on him.

There is a language to these social norms and labels as well. Norms and stereotypes can often be harmful and can put people into boxes. Young adult books can be used to change the discussion about LGBTQ rights, especially when it comes to acceptance and normalization of queer identities. When writing to his online pen pal Blue, Simon says, “don’t you think everyone should have to come out? Why is straight the default?” and later Simon realizes upon meeting Blue that “white shouldn’t be the default any more than straight should be the default. There shouldn’t even be a default” (Albertalli 269). In society, people are assumed straight until proven otherwise, which fuels heteronormativity. Someone’s identity should not be assumed, because those assumptions are often based on stereotypes. In the article “Reading LGBT-Themed Literature with Young People: What’s Possible?” authors Caroline Clark and Mollie Blackburn discuss different ways to counter heterosexism and homophobia in the classroom. The authors state that “the dynamics shaped by homophobia and heteronormativity in schools influence the positions of readers and texts, the degree to which students enjoy the readings, and the political action sparked by this work” (Clark and Blackburn 25). *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*

deals with who gets to tell their own story. Coming out should be an experience that a person owns, not something that should be taken away from them by outing them. Simon feels angry about being outed by Martin in such a public way, because he was not given the chance to make his own decision. Of course, coming out is not a thing that only happens once, as many LGBTQ people have to come out to people hundreds of times in their lives and it is a continual process. Popular young adult novels have the power to change the discussion about LGBTQ rights by making it okay to talk about being gay. Young Adult novels with LGBTQ characters have existed for decades; Nancy Garden's *Annie on My Mind* was written in 1982 and was one of the most frequently challenged books in the early 1990s, according to the American Library Association. This novel tells the story of two seventeen-year-old girls who fall in love. While over 30 years ago was not that long ago, 30 years is a long time in terms of advances in LGBTQ rights.

Literature is often an opportunity for a person to tell their story, whether that is fiction or nonfiction. Different types of storytelling, such as podcast interviews, are other ways for people to have their story heard. *Queery* is a podcast hosted by stand-up comedian Cameron Esposito where she interviews people who identify as queer. It is an opportunity for listeners to hear that there is no one way to be gay, as with all other identities there is no one way to be that type of person. In the September 30, 2018 episode, Cameron Esposito interviews Riley Silverman, a stand-up comedian who identifies as transgender. In the interview, Silverman is talking about transitioning while being in the public eye as a stand-up comedian: "But when I was like no I want to live full time as myself, and I want people to see me as the woman that I am, my look didn't dramatically change that much, just my own understanding of my identity had changed, and so suddenly I felt like I had to, I don't know, like get a Rosetta Stone in my language

between what I used to say and what I was saying now” (Queery 17:06-17:26). Silverman is saying that she felt that she needed a new language to understand herself and to help others understand her. Gender identity can be as fluid as language, and gender is a type of language. The term “queer” itself is a widely debated word because for so long, it was used in a derogatory way against gay people. Some gay people do not like to identify themselves with that word, but many other gay people have reclaimed that word as an identity for themselves, sort of as an umbrella term for being gay. By including podcasts and other multimedia tools into the classroom, it provides another medium that students can interact with stories. Many fictional podcasts are in fact scripted, like an audiobook. Most podcasts are also free, providing access to information and stories like Riley Silverman’s about almost any subject.

When analyzing a text like *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* for things like the language of gender and sexuality, is it necessary to call upon the work on renowned queer studies/feminist theorist Judith Butler and her work in literary criticism. In the 1988 essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” Butler writes about how gender and language are performances in society. This does not mean that they are fraudulent; these just means that gender and language can change. She does compare gender to a theatrical performance, stating that people change how they look or speak based on the environment. Butler is arguing that performative gender identity is compelled by social sanctions and taboos. Gender depends on repetitive acts that depends on social conventions that continue on throughout a person’s life. For Butler, “the fundamental categories of identity are cultural and social productions, more likely to be the result of political cooperation than its condition of possibility. They create the effect of the natural and by imposing norms they threaten to exclude those who don’t conform (Culler 102-103). Because of strict societal binaries about masculinity versus femininity, anyone who does

not follow that binary is at risk of being excluded from society. In *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, Simon feels that he must perform an identity for his peers and his family, and that he has no space to be a different person than they think he should be. Language is performed in a similar way where people are often ostracized for not speaking English in the United States, when the US does not in fact have an official language. People can change how they act or speak based like they would change an outfit, and many would equate clothing to gender performance and identity.

Literature can be a form of resistance to fight against injustice and oppression, especially when it comes to finding one's voice. Angie Thomas' novel *The Hate U Give* is about a young girl named Starr who witnesses the death of her friend Khalil at the hands of a white police officer. This pivotal moment comes very early in the book—Starr struggles to find herself after witnessing this traumatic moment, but also must face her family, the media, and her community. The way that the media presence in the novel twists Starr's story and changes the way that the public viewed Khalil is an important aspect of this story because it still happens today with media representation of police brutality. As a young black girl who attends a private school with mostly white students, Starr feels she must behave differently at school than when she's with her family; she feels caught between worlds. Starr often talks about code-switching, or when a person switches between languages, or but also can mean changes in how they look, act, or talk based on their environment. When Starr is at school, she is "flipping the switch in my brain so I'm Williamson Starr. Williamson Starr doesn't use slang—if a rapper would say it, she doesn't say it, even if her white friends do. Slang makes them cool. Slang makes her 'hood.' Williamson Starr holds her tongue when people piss her off no nobody will think she's the 'angry black girl'...Basically, Williamson Starr doesn't give anyone a reason to call her ghetto" (Thomas 71).

Starr must constantly change herself to fit her environment so that people will not make judgements about her based on stereotypes. Her code-switching is a type of linguistic strategy because she has to change her word choice and her reactions to avoid stereotypes and racism from her white peers. The white kids at her school can say whatever they want and use slang to seem cool. For so long, white people have made racist remarks about black culture, but then they pick and choose elements of black culture to steal and make their own to seem cool and popular. Starr is caught in her own binary in her life—Williamson vs. her family—and she feels divided in a way that makes her question herself and her space in the world.

As Starr struggles with the trauma following Khalil's shooting, she also must deal with what everyone expects of her, especially coming from the media. She wants to speak up and fight to get justice for Khalil, but she feels trapped and is uncertain of her future. Starr says, "I always said that if I saw it happen to somebody, I would have the loudest voice, making sure the world knew what went down. Now I am that person, and I'm too afraid to speak" (Thomas 35). The police and the media twist her words into their own twisted version of what happened, not listening to Starr's voice at all. Finally, Starr is able to find her voice and stand up for herself, specifically while leading protests. While Starr was in the car with Khalil before he died, Khalil was talking about Tupac and the meaning of THUGLIFE. Khalil says, "The Hate U—the letter U—Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody. T-H-U-G L-I-F-E. Meaning what society give us as youth, it bites them in the ass when we wild out" (Thomas 17). There is a cycle of racism and systematic oppression that starts from birth, and this racism towards feeds back into society. In Kierstin Thompson's article "Beyond the Stacks: Why High School English Teachers Should be Talking about Books," she found that "teachers, believing that they do not have adequate defense for the literature they teach, choose less dynamic and even less diverse texts to avoid criticism,

district reprimand, or worse” (Thompson 37). Some teachers might feel that they cannot have discussions about race or sexuality, and therefore avoid talking about those topics. It should be acknowledged that teaching is an incredibly difficult job and teachers should be respected and acknowledged for the work that they are doing. However, literature is supposed to make people feel uncomfortable, because it means that people are learning about the life experiences of others and making them question themselves and society, just as Freire and Harro have suggested. Poet and writer Audre Lorde wrote that “certainly there are very real differences between us of race, age, and sex. But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences” (Lorde 115). It is important that people are different, but people must learn to accept the differences of others and not view them as inferior. When people do not take the time to understand other people who have different experiences, or have blatantly racist views towards others, then that leads to marginalization, government laws that target certain communities, and even movements to directly harm others.

In 1972, the Executive Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) and the National Council of Teacher of English (NCTE) passed a resolution on “students’ rights to their own patterns and varieties of language.” This means that all dialects and languages must be acknowledged and respected in classroom environments (Perryman-Clark et. al. 1). This is not only extremely important for English Language Learner (ELL) students, who do not speak English as a first language, but to any student who speaks another language other than English. This even applies to students who speak different dialects and vernaculars, like African-American Vernacular English (AAVE). “Students’ Rights to Their Own Language” means that there is not an “improper” way to speak English and that students can speak English or other languages in any way that they choose in an English classroom. This

is an important document stating that students can represent their own cultures in the classroom in a way that is meaningful to them. YA literature acknowledges the differences in language and cultures in ways that are relevant to students and readers, while also showing the ways that languages can be represented in different genres of fiction.

Since the dystopian novel has gained more popularity in young adult literature in recent years, it is an important genre to recognize, as the events in the novel are often directly commenting on the societal issues of the time. The dystopian novel serves as a way to think about the future might turn out, especially if societal problems of the present do not change and therefore turn into terrible dystopian futures. In Cherie Dimaline's dystopian novel *The Marrow Thieves*, climate change has destroyed the future and the Indigenous people of North America are being hunted for their bone marrow. Society has lost the ability to dream because of the destruction to the climate and lack of resources, and it is believed that the key to getting back the ability to dream is in the bone marrow of Indigenous people. Frenchie, the main character, finds family in a group of other Indigenous people, mostly the Anishinaabe people of Canada, who are also running from the government. Frenchie states that as a kid with his family he always felt special, but that was "before [he] knew how dangerous special could be" (Dimaline 6). Frenchie understands that his culture and his ability to dream makes him special, but it also is the reason that he was separated from his family and hunted by the government. This book not only serves as a warning for what the future might hold, but also as a comment on the past and the history of Canada and the United States murdering Native Americans and creating residential schools. In *The Marrow Thieves*, when the government realized that they could take bone marrow from Indigenous people, they brought back the residential schools of the past and "they turned to history to show them how to best keep us warehoused...that's when the new residential schools

started growing up from first like poisonous brick mushrooms. We go to the schools and they leach the dreams from where our ancestors hid them.” (Dimaline 89-90). This indicates that history has continued to repeat itself and racism is still a large problem in the United States.

The television documentary *In the White Man's Image* discusses the history of residential schools in the United States, a program to force Native Americans to replicate white people by teaching them English and forbidding them to speak their own languages. These schools stripped Native Americans of their cultures. In *The Marrow Thieves*, Frenchie and the others talk about Story and the storytelling tradition as a way to preserve their culture. This is an important in terms of thinking about how families, communities, and cultures share an oral history. Story is an opportunity to keep history alive and learn about cultural beliefs. The native author Thomas King wrote *The Truth About Stories* which contains creation stories, family history, and personal anecdotes. He writes about the value of storytelling and how important it is to know someone else's story in order to understand them. King states that “the truth about stories is that that's all we are” (King 3). Identities and cultures are built around stories, from family, friends, or community. Stories tell people where they came from and give them advice for the present and future. Stories keep alive Native cultures and traditions in a society that has tried to take everything away from them. Curry Stephenson Malott in the essay “Class Consciousness and Teacher Education” writes “critical educators also understand that the Indian Boarding school project was an extended government-funded effort designed to both disconnect Native Americans from their ancestral lands by obliterating Native American cultures, customs, economies, and languages, and replacing them with a worldview conducive to industrial capitalism” (Malott 168). It is important to reflect on ways to decolonize literature and school systems while facing the terrible impact of colonization.

Young adult literature creates a space for teenagers who feel like they do not belong and do not have a place in the world, but they very much desire a sense of belonging and a sense of their own history. Richard Van Camp's *The Lesser Blessed* follows Larry, a First Nations teenage boy struggles with his past traumas as he makes new friends, and then must deal with the social pressures that follow. Larry's family is from the Dogrib tribe in Canada. He becomes friends with a popular kid and falls in love with the popular girl Juliette, but their friendship could not last. Larry's past traumas are from his father abusing him and then Larry lighting himself on fire. Larry is able to find comfort in hope, saying "I wept because I did not belong to anyone I was not owned...I knew my life was still unwrapped I would in time find one to call my own" (Van Camp 134). Larry is hopeful about the relationship that he has with his stepdad and his mom, and he has hope that they can work through the past together as a family. Sherman Alexie's *Flight* tells the story of Zits, who is a Native American teenage boy who is in the foster care system. He decides to attempt to shoot up a bank, but before doing so, he seems to have visions where he time travels through the bodies of five different people, from cops to Native Americans in the 1800s, to pilots, to eventually being his own father. Zits seems to understand more about himself and his history after these visions, and his life turns around. However, not only does he not have his parents around to help guide him, but much of Native American history and culture have been erased, so Zits has nowhere to turn to understand himself and his culture. He feels like he does not understand his place in history or his place in the world. In the body of his father, Zits repeats to the white man on the street "I want some respect" and when the man replies with "How do I show you some respect?" he says, "Tell me a story" (Alexie 143). This reflects back to the power and respect of storytelling. Telling someone a story means that they trust that other person and view them as equal. *Flight* could be taught in a classroom as a

whole novel, or each chapter could be read separately as a vignette. Perhaps similar to *Flying Lessons*, these vignettes from *Flight* could be read in between larger novels or for quick readings in class for writing responses. For example, if reading *The Lesser Blessed* in class, the students could read a vignette from *Flight* and discuss the different ways that the boys have been affected by their fathers or themes of loneliness.

Graphic novels also allow for many students to connect to a text because it connects to a wider range of reader: those that are interested in art or are visual learners who have an easier time reading with artwork. This often allows for another layer of representation from the artist's perspective, as many graphic novelists draw and write their own stories. Drawings themselves should be treated like a language, as the different drawing techniques add another layer to the story. It may be easier for students to understand literary concepts like symbolism or irony when represented visually in a graphic novel. It is possible that an alternative to the dominant language in society might not even be language at all, but in fact artwork because visuals can act as a universal language. The artists/writers can portray themselves and their stories in a way that is personal and powerful. *Persepolis* by Marjan Satrapi is a memoir about Satrapi's own experience growing up in Iran during the Islamic Revolution. Her family was in the streets protesting the government and some of her family members went to jail for their political actions. She discusses her own relationship with her faith and how that changed throughout her childhood. Satrapi writes that, even as a child, "the reason for my shame and for the revolution is the same: the difference between social classes" (Satrapi 33). Satrapi was aware as a young child that her family was wealthy and felt guilty about her family's wealth because of the revolution. When Marjane is a teenager, she is sent to Austria by her parents to avoid political violence and possibly execution. Reading *Persepolis* would be a great way to create an interdisciplinary lesson

with the history department in a school. While the novel gives a large amount of detail about the Iranian Revolution and how it impacted Satrapi's family, it would be an opportunity to collaborate with the history department so that a history teacher could explain the Islamic Revolution in greater detail to the students.

It is often asked if graphic novels have literary value or not, but graphic novels should be treated like any other form of literature and are very useful in classrooms. Graphic novels are great for students who have varied learning styles, such as visual learners. Graphic novels also get kids involved who really enjoy art. A possible lesson plan idea would be to have students work together to create a graphic novel of their own, about a story they wrote or translating a text like *Frankenstein* or *The Great Gatsby* into a graphic novel version, with a drawing or a collage. In order to incorporate images, students must think about the storyline, which is an essential part of any graphic novel. Michael Pagliaro's essay "Is a Picture Worth a Thousand Words? Determining the Criteria for Graphic Novels with Literary Merit" includes charts and ways to assess if a graphic novel should be taught in a classroom. He argues for the literary merit of graphic novels for all age groups. One graphic novel that would be appropriate for a middle school class would be *The Witch Boy* by Molly Ostertag. This is a middle grade graphic novel about witches and magic, but also about family expectations. The main character Aster wants to be a witch, not a shapeshifter like all of the other boys in his family. This text talks about breaking free from gender expectations; since only girls were allowed to be witches, Aster faces pushback from his family, but they eventually learn to accept his powers. This novel also talks about how to break out of gender expectations and how there is power in being yourself.

While sections from some of the texts mentioned could be used at a middle school level, such as *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, it is also important to look at

books that are specifically made for middle grade readers. *Flying Lessons*, edited by Ellen Oh, is a collection of short stories specifically written for middle grade readers, all written by authors from diverse cultural backgrounds. These short stories deal with a wide range of topics, like basketball, having a crush on the new girl, and even pirates. Many of these stories deal with family relationships, which is a common thread in YA lit. In the short story “Sol Painting, Inc.” by Meg Medina, a daughter and a son follow their father to work for a painting job. Her brother explains to her, “Papi *chose* to be invisible today so that you won’t ever have to be” (Medina 59). This means that her father sacrificed his pride for her future at the school, when she thought that her father should have stood up for himself. This is a reality for many families in the United States. There are generational misunderstandings between parents and children, especially when a person has sacrificed so much for their child.

While any of these short stories can and should be taught in classrooms, it is important to include stories from multicultural perspectives even at a school with a strict curriculum; however, it is important that these short stories are not viewed as “extra material” that diminishes the experiences of the students. These short stories could be woven in to a larger lesson on a different novel or could be taught in a unit about short stories. The short story of which the anthology takes its name, “Flying Lessons,” by Soman Chainani, is about a twelve-year-old boy named Santosh who goes on vacation with his grandmother to Spain. Santosh feels that his grandmother does not really understand him, and feels embarrassed by her wealth, how she dresses, and how she often leaves him to fend for himself. Santosh does well in school and wins academic awards, but still feels lonely and isolated. He says, “I can have all the success in the world, but no one will ever like me” (Chainani 144). When Santosh is at the beach, he meets a boy playing ball with his friends, and with his grandmother’s help, Santosh is able to talk to him.

Although Santosh spoke English and Tomas spoke Spanish, they were able to “talk in our own chaotic Spanglish: a fluid version of English, Spanish, and body language that makes absolutely no sense, and yet we understand each other completely” (Chainani 155). Santosh finally has hope and feels connected to someone, even if they were not speaking the same language. He was finally able to understand someone else and make a connection. The *Flying Lessons* anthology was edited by Ellen Oh, who cofounded the nonprofit We Need Diverse Books, which is a “non-profit and a grassroots organization of children’s book lovers that advocates essential changes in the publishing industry to produce and promote literature that reflects and honors the lives of all young people” (diversebooks.org). This nonprofit has information on their website, diversebooks.org, about where to find books and how important it is to have representation. We Need Diverse Books has created two anthologies with short stories to provide a more diverse voice in children’s literature, and these anthologies are specifically made to be school-friendly, meaning that they can be easily read in a classroom.

While Standard Written English is often what is taught in English classrooms, it must be understood that students all have their own individual ways of speaking and that students should not be penalized for their English-speaking abilities or their English vernacular. Standard Written English is a target for academic discourse, but it is just as important that the diversity of languages should be celebrated. There is a difference between informing the students of the “rules” of academic grammar and professional writing and strictly enforcing these rules. Critical pedagogy in the English classroom is vital when thinking about language performance and inclusion, as well as using literary theory as a lens for analyzing literature. In *Interpreting Young Adult Literature: Literary Theory in the Secondary Classroom*, John Moore maps out how to use critical pedagogy and literary theory in every day classroom environments. It is important to

connect with literary theory when reading YA lit because reading is a “a performance in language and about language. Theories of reading teach us how to enact these performances; they provide us the tools with which we can create or construct our interpretations of texts” (Moore 11). This connects back to Judith Butler’s theory on gender as a performance and the connections to language. Tools for interpretation allow for students to have their own view on a text. For example, reader-response theory says that “reading is an event, a process that takes place between reader and text...the ways in which we respond personally to texts and how our personal history gets embedded in the text” (Moore 12). A student’s life experiences are brought to the page every time that student picks up a book; literature could not exist without the person reading it. Every student would read *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* or *The Hate U Give* differently because of their lived experiences. A feminist reading of a text would focus on gender studies; for example, how Marjane Satrapi experiences the Islamic Revolution as a young woman. A cultural reading of a text would be focused on how the cultures present in a text create meaning. The language of critical pedagogy and the language of academia are often critiqued as being elitist and inaccessible; education is not accessible to many, and the language used is often convoluted. By inviting students to think about literary theory in high school classrooms and how to apply it to texts, teachers can make literary theory more accessible. It might seem unnecessary since most students will most likely not be English majors, but it is important because it gets students to think about the lens in which people read and see the world. The skills that students learn from literary theory and criticism will benefit them as they go into their futures.

Educators often want to include books with characters from multicultural backgrounds, but often find it difficult to include new texts in the classroom because of the limitations of the

Common Core and school standards. It is understandable that some schools cannot afford to buy new books and must use the books that the school has owned for many years, which might not include young adult novels or linguistically diverse texts. The book *Un-Standardizing Curriculum: Multicultural Teaching in the Standards-Based Classroom* by Christine Sleeter and Judith Carmona discuss multicultural teaching with Common Core and test-based lessons. This educational source provides resources on how to be more inclusive in the classroom environment, and therefore in life. Some might see multicultural education as an add on rather than an integration, as “separate lessons or extra content to squeeze into an already crowded curriculum” (Sleeter and Carmona 44). It is understandable that teachers have many texts to get through in the school year and might feel that they do not have time to get through the novels or texts that they are not required to teach. Curriculum modification is often difficult because of Common Core, state standards, and test-based mentalities. However, if multicultural identities in literature are put to the side, students might feel that their own identities are not important. Multicultural education advocates argue that “building curriculum and pedagogy on the cultural frames of reference and linguistic strengths of students from historically oppressed communities shows promise for improving student learning” (Sleeter and Carmona 16). This means that curriculum is built with students from marginalized communities in mind, with their backgrounds and experiences. One way to resolve this is to work with a backwards design by thinking about what students should learn at the end of the lesson, like central ideas and essential understandings, and then planning the lessons from there.

Many of the state standards create binaries for students and divide the world into us vs. them, which creates a dynamic in schools that makes students feel separated from other cultures and communities, especially other countries. There are three main binaries that dominate state

standards: Western vs. non-Western, Judeo-Christian vs. other religious traditions, and democratic political systems and free-market economies vs. totalitarian systems (Sleeter and Carmona 58). These educational binaries put the United States first and all other countries and religions second, which is not a good educational mentality. Breaking apart these restrictive binaries would mean understanding other countries and, most importantly, acknowledging the many mistakes that the United States has made. The community teacher “characterizes teachers who learn to construct meaningful learning environments for students from historically oppressed communities” (Sleeter and Carmona 102). However, it is important to be careful about not making assumptions about students and take the time to get to know students.

Below is a section taken from a chart found in the research “Connecting the Canon to Current Young Adult Literature” by Katie Rybakova and Rikki Roccanti. Rybakova and Roccanti discuss how to translate novels and short stories that are normally considered part of the literary canon and taught in classrooms. Each YA literature novel is paired with a novel normally included in the literary canon. The authors also include the reasoning behind the choices and the connections between the novel:

| YA Lit Novel | Canonical Connections | Connecting Elements |
|--|---|--|
| <i>The Book Thief</i> by Markus Zusak | <i>The Diary of a Young Girl</i> by Anne Frank <i>Night</i> by Elie Wiesel | Event-The Holocaust and World War II |
| <i>Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children</i> by Ransom Riggs | <i>Lord of the Flies</i> by Golding | Theme/genre-Peculiarity, magical realism |

A recreated version of this chart using the novels from this research:

| YA Lit Novel | Canonical Connections | Connecting Elements |
|---|---------------------------------------|---|
| <i>Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe</i> | <i>Drown</i> by Junot Diaz | Friendship, family relationships and expectations |
| <i>The Hate U Give</i> | <i>Sag Harbor</i> by Colson Whitehead | Code-switching, identity, racism |

| | | |
|---------------------------|---|--|
| | <i>Invisible Man</i> by Ralph Ellison <i>Go Tell It on the Mountain</i> by James Baldwin | |
| <i>The Marrow Thieves</i> | <i>1984</i> by George Orwell <i>Handmaid's Tale</i> by Margaret Atwood | Dystopian novel, characters being followed or hunted |

Comparing YA literature novels to other canonical text could be a classroom assessment, where students would be asked to look at a text and make thematic connections with another novel, short story, or poem. Making connections to other YA lit or with other novels is helpful for students to think about themes. It also means that if they like one novel, there is probably another novel that they would like too because of thematic similarities. Making these recommendations to students helps them think about the possibilities of reading, and possibly make them enjoy reading. The website ReMezcla published an article titled “The Literary Canon is Mostly White. Here’s an Alternative Latin American Reading List” written by Alejandra Oliva. This article discusses the literary canon and how exclusive it is. The author provides a list of books by Latin American authors, as well as providing a book that is usually considered part of the literary canon, such as *Catcher in the Rye*, that would have thematic connections to her suggested book. This is a way for students to access technology to find books that they might enjoy, while making thematic connections and questioning the literary canon themselves.

Technology has become such a central part of society, especially in the lives of young people; because of that, the way that people learn, and the way students read, has changed drastically. Not to mention the changes in literature itself, as authors start to weave more technology into their stories. In a way, books and writings have become more accessible because of internet and cell phones; a person can read a *New York Times* article on the train, read a novel

on their Kindle app, or listen to an audiobook with their phone. However, this also means that people are constantly bombarded with information at an overwhelming pace. Schools and education systems are also working to add more technology into curriculums, which can often be beneficial, especially in terms of emailing students, posting grades, completing assignments online, and the ability to access class information from home. By using young adult literature novels in the classroom, this means that the texts that are read will reflect the impact of technology on society, as characters will reference using technology and apps that are current to that year that the text was written. The quick pace at which technology changes almost month to month often mirrors the fast-paced releases of new young adult literature books, and the often fast-paced plot lines in the texts themselves.

There are many websites that are dedicated to creating databases for diverse literature, for helping readers find books. These websites help students, teachers, and any readers into finding young adult literature. Queer Books for Teens (queerbooksforteens.com) has resources for teens and teachers, along with blogs, awards, and lists of books. Sometimes connecting to a single book is all that the student needs to help them start reading, and that book could be discovered on these websites. We Need Diverse Books (diversebooks.org) provides resources for writers, an app called OurStory, programs, and information about where to find diverse books.

Well Read Black Girl website created an anthology called *Well Read Black Girl*. Librarians and teachers can also help people find books based on their interest. Giving students resources to search for books can help them find more diverse books for research projects. It is necessary to look at the different ways that students are reading and accessing information because things are changing at a rapid rate. The phrases “multiple literacies,” “new literacies,” or “twenty-first century literacies” all mean the same thing; “new literacies refer to the evolving forms of literacy

made possible by digital technology developments” (Cart 238). Students are using language that is quickly evolving and it is important to recognize their changing language. Students also are reading a large amount of material online, so it is important to give them the skills to navigate the online world.

Technology changes so quickly with new updates, new devices, and new posts; because of how quickly information is spread on the internet, technology mirrors and encourages the change of language. Technology makes it quite easy to learn a new language, but also facilitates the spread of new words and phrases from different communities. These could be technology-related words, like *tweet* or *emoji*, or slang words that travel quickly from around the world. Because everything changes so quickly, however, certain language phrases, much like old posts, might not be relevant or viewed anymore. This could be an issue with YA lit in the future, because if an author mentions social media that is popular in the year that the novel was published, it could be soon that these social media references will become outdated. However, reading new YA lit authors in the classroom means that many of these authors are still alive and have public profiles that can be accessed online. Students can watch interviews with the author, listen to the speak on a podcast, or go on their website or social media to learn more about them. Technology creates more of a connection between these authors and the students, which is not the same connection that they would necessarily get from reading an author from 200 years ago. With internet access in some classrooms, there are also opportunities for creating assignments that are based in library research and teaching students how to use databases. Technology and internet access could help students learn how to find information and give them skills for accessing libraries.

There is a history of texts with themes of sexuality, gender, and cultural identity being banned or challenged by libraries and schools; not only does this hide these texts from students who might enjoy these texts, but it sends a message to students saying that their identities should be hidden, which is a dangerous message. Sex, drug use, swearing, and mental health have all been cited reasons for taking books off shelves, but these are issues that many adolescents are dealing with in their day-to-day lives. Usually, most if not all of the books on lists of challenged books are Young Adult books, or Children's literature. Challenging a book means controlling what children read, but they should be given more freedoms to access information. According to the American Library Association's website, the difference between a banned book and a challenged book is that "A challenge is an attempt to remove or restrict materials, based upon the objections of a person or group. A banning is the removal of those materials. Challenges do not simply involve a person expressing a point of view; rather, they are an attempt to remove material from the curriculum or library, thereby restricting the access of others" (<http://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/aboutbannedbooks>). This does not necessarily mean that the book is removed from a shelf just because it was challenged by someone; many people often fight to combat these attempts to remove books, therefore allowing for them to remain in a curriculum or a collection.

Since Young Adult literature is so tied to banned and challenged books, it is necessary to look at why these issues of identity and sex are often deemed "inappropriate" and why it is important for students to have access to information. Young Adult literature is about characters facing new problems and the realities of being an adult, learning how to deal things that they never have faced before. Michael Cart's book "Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism" discusses the history of YA lit and some of the current trends; he argues that "not to

include sex in books for contemporary high-school students is to agree to a de facto conspiracy of silence, to imply to young readers that sex is so awful, so traumatic, so dirty that we can't even write about it" (Cart 179). For example, in *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, Simon and Blue have honest conversations about sex and sexuality and feel that they can only confide in each other. English teachers do not necessarily have to have conversations about sexuality, but Cart is arguing that when writers do not mention it in their books when they are specifically writing for a young adult audience, it gives adolescents the idea that sex should not be talked about and could make them feel isolated. Ignoring conversations about sex means ignoring the problems that teenagers face, especially if they feel that they have no one to talk to. Books about identity and sexuality are often challenged by parents, teachers, and other members of the community, but these books are often some of the most popular books with students. It is also important to think about how students want to be learning about the topics and themes in these books. For example, *The Hate U Give* is number 8 on the Top 10 Most Challenged books of 2017, but *The Hate U Give* has also spent 77 weeks at number 1 on the New York Times Best Sellers Young Adult Hardcover list and has a movie that was released in October 2018.

In 2017, the Top Ten Challenged Books are, in order: *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie, *Drama* by Raina Telgemeier, *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini, *George* by Alex Gino, *Sex is a Funny Word* by Cory Silverberg, *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, *And Tango Makes Three* by Peter Parnell and Justin Richardson, and *I Am Jazz* written by Jessica Herthel and Jazz Jennings (bannedbooksweek.org). From this list, it is evident that the books in the United States that are most often banned or challenged are books about suicide, race, gender, and sexuality. While many of these books have been published in the past fifteen

years, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was published in 1960 and was voted in 2018 as America's #1 Best-Loved novel by the PBS program "The Great American Read" (<https://www.pbs.org/the-great-american-read/home/>). It seems that the novels in the United States that are so well-loved are also often the novels that are challenged so often.

Addressing the topics and themes in these novels that are considered "controversial" are clearly important because these are issues that students deal with every day. If students are kept in the dark about the realities of growing up, it is not helpful for them. They might internalize these feelings and think that their feelings about identity are not worth talking about. However, literary censorship is incredibly different from what is appropriate for certain age levels. For example, a book that talks about sex and violence would not be appropriate for a young child in elementary school because of how children develop but could be fine for high schoolers. Censorship usually indicates the government deciding what the public can and cannot know, but it also indicated when a person in power decides what another person can learn. It is important to acknowledge that many parents might be upset about the choice of books in this research. Parents or guardians might try to censor what their students are reading or topics that might be considered controversial like sex or drugs by confronting the teacher about it. Teachers might have to deal with pushback from parents or guardians, which might be when some of these controversial topics are addressed. When discussing topics that might be considered controversial, all students do not necessarily have to participate in the discussion if they are not comfortable. Rules for classroom discussion would help students stay focused, such as argument points should try to be unbiased and based around facts and being respectful when having a classroom discussion. These literary discussions are not meant to be political arguments, but instead an analysis of the literature. These are not necessarily discussions about political parties;

having conversations about the importance of identity and language diversity are important to all people from all backgrounds and are not necessarily aligned with particular political parties because identity and language are about the human experience.

By making stories about culture and language more accessible to students, education can have a large impact in how students see themselves and form identities. By adapting to language changes and social changes, this creates space for growth that is mirrored in language acceptance. Adapting to language change is important, especially when it helps people feel more comfortable in their identity. Adapting to language means being understanding of language changes in society and in the classroom. English literature creates space for acceptance and empathy. Readers can hear other peoples' stories and it brings understanding and awareness in that person's own voice. Young adult literature has as much value as any other type of literature because the lives of young people cannot be dismissed or ignored. The classroom can give students the space to talk about things in their lives that are important to them. By breaking open the literary canon and teaching books that are more relevant to students, this makes education more accessible for everyone. Giving students access to linguistically diverse books, whether that is through the classroom curriculum, a classroom library, or recommendations to students, it diversifies the definitions of language and identity.

Appendix:

Possible Lesson Plan 1:

Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe:

Lesson Length: 1 class period

Content Area: English Literature, 10th grade

Overview: Students will read *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*. Students will do reflective writing about themselves in their notebooks. They will also do a creative research assignment that has two parts, which they will use school computers for.

Objectives: Students will be able to...

-Identify and analyze some of the major themes from *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*

-read and understand poetry

-understand the arguments the novel is making about why poetry and art are important to communities, cultures, and society

-write about themselves and reflect on their own identities, as well as the identities of the characters

Essential Questions:

-Why are art and poetry important to communities, cultures, and society?

-How do we think about our own identities?

-How are language and family connected?

Procedure/Activity:

For this activity, students will go to the computer lab or borrow the school's computers to do some research on the poetry and artwork mentioned in the text. First, students will find one of

the pieces of artwork or an artist mentioned in the book. The students will do research on the painting and write about why they believe it is important to the book and the characters. They should write a paragraph about why they believe this painting is important. A quote from the text is “poems are like people.” The second part of the assignment is to find a poem that the student believes describes them and their identity, then write a paragraph explaining why they identify with the poem. So essentially, this assignment has 2 parts:

1. find a painting/artist from the text and explain why it’s important in relation to the text
2. find a poem that the student feels that they identify with and explain why they believe that it relates to them

At the end of the class students will talk about the painting they researched and the poem they chose.

Assessment:

-Students will answer the writing prompt questions at the beginning of class, and these writing exercises will be marked with either a check, a check plus, or a check minus.

-Based on the poetry/artwork activity, the students’ writing will be assessed based on how thoroughly they completed the writing exercise: if they wrote two paragraphs, if their reasonings were good, if they related their reasonings back to the text, etc.

Writing prompts for the beginning of class:

-Let’s try to answer the questions that the author proposes at the beginning of the novel: “Why do we smile? Why do we laugh? Why do we feel alone?” How would you think Ari or Dante would answer these questions?

-Ari feels that people expect something from him because he’s named after the philosopher Aristotle. Do people expect things from you? Do they expect you to act in a certain way? Are

there certain family expectations or social norms that affect you? If so, where do you think those expectations come from? How do you feel about those expectations?

Materials:

- the novel Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe
- notebook for students to write in
- if possible, access to computers to do research on poems/artwork
- pen/pencil

Accommodations:

- make sure that these students are given extra time on assignments, and they can take tests in a separate room if they require it
- students will not be forced to read out loud
- classroom distractions will be kept to a minimum
- the directions for all assignments will be read out loud, and given to the students on a sheet of paper
- students will be given graphic organizers and notes if they need them
- students will receive extra help from the teacher if they need it

Massachusetts Common Core State Standards:

RL.9-10.1-2. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what a text states explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text. Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of a text.

RL.9-10.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

W.9-10.1. Write arguments (e.g., essays, letters to the editor, advocacy speeches) to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

Homework/Continuation Activity:

-read the next section from the novel and come up with 2 questions that the student had from the text and 2 things that the student thought were important.

Possible Lesson Plan 2:

Grade: 8th grade ELA

Lesson Plan: *Flying Lessons* and Narrative

Lesson Length: 2-3 class periods

Overview: Students will read short stories from the anthology *Flying Lessons and Other Stories*.

After the class has read the book, students will complete a creative writing assessment where they will write their own short story using elements from the short stories. Students will have a large amount of freedom in this assignment but will be given a rubric and detailed instructions. They will be given a class period to work on it. They will work on it for homework, but also spend 2-3 class periods working on it in class. The teacher will work on scaffolding with the students, working on specific paragraphs and then putting it all together at the end.

Objectives: Students will be able to...

- analyze a short story and reflect on literary elements of the text
- connect their writing to elements of the text, such as themes, quotes, and literary devices
- write a creative writing piece, specifically a short story

Procedure/Activity:

-The class has read *Flying Lessons*. The teacher will recap this book and ask students what some of their favorite moments were from the short stories. The teacher will give them time to discuss the book as a class.

-Explain the final assessment for this book. Students will be able to work on their creative writing project in class, using laptops or by going to the computer lab. They will be able to meet with me during class to brainstorm their ideas for a creative writing project. They will be given a rubric to which they will be graded. Students can ask questions about the assignment if they have any.

Materials:

-The book *Flying Lessons*

-access to computers to type out their short stories, either at the computer lab or via laptops.

Assessment:

Writing a creative story. This can be a story that is more reality-based, or it can be more fictional. The short stories should be 3-4 pages in length, typed and double spaced in 12-point Times New Roman font (but it can be longer than 4 pages if students want, but they do not have to). They should be similar to *Flying Lessons*, in that most of the stories include themes of family, responsibility, and the search for identity. If they so choose, a student could also create a graphic novel version of their story. Students should choose a specific writing style or literary device that they would like to emulate in your writing style. For example, how the first short story is written completely in the second person. Or, they could take a line from a short story and write your short story based on that. For example, in the short story “Flying Lessons,” there is a quote that says: “all of us need something to look forward to” (156). Students could write a short story where someone is looking forward to something and why that is important. Along with the

short story, students will pass in a paragraph about which writing style, literary device, or quote you chose to base your short story on. This paragraph should reflect on your own writing.

Students will have the one class period to start their assignment, and then they will work on it at home for homework and it will be due at the end of the week. If students do not have access to internet or have difficulties accessing a computer, arrangements will be made with the student.

Accommodations:

- make sure that these students are given extra time on assignments
- students will not be forced to read out loud
- classroom distractions will be kept to a minimum
- the directions for all assignments will be read out loud, and given to the students on a sheet of paper
- students will be given graphic organizers and notes if they need them
- students will receive extra help from the teacher if they need it

Possible Lesson Plan 3:

The Hate U Give and Developing Critical Consciousness.

Based on lesson plans from ReadWriteThink.org. Lesson plans created by Scott Filkins

Grade: 11

Time: 3-4 class periods

Overview

After reading the Angie Thomas' YA lit novel *The Hate U Give*, students will work for 2-3 class periods on building their knowledge of the Black Lives Matter movement and similar activist movements. They will be listening to radio interviews and examining the Black Lives Matter official website. This assignment is not necessarily for students to write their opinion on the Black Lives Matter movement, or for them to argue against it. This is for students to learn about

the movement; students should learn how to research a topic without necessarily letting their opinion make their research biased. Students will be working on a short research project to learn about the context of certain aspects of the novel: double consciousness/codeswitching, the Black Panther movement, Tupac Shakur as an activist, and media portrayal of police violence (they will be limited to these topics, but if there is another topics that they would like to research, they can discuss it with me). Students will be referencing specific passages in the text where these topics come up, and discuss their research paralleled to these scenes in the novel. As a class, we will also be looking at excerpts from James Baldwin’s essay “Letter to My Nephew” and Ta-Nehisi Coates’ “Letter to My Son.”

Objectives:

Students will be able to...

- identify the goals, beliefs, and history of the Black Lives Matter movement
- read closely and analyze complex nonfiction/supplemental texts related to the novel
- use guided research to inform themselves on a certain topic and apply that to discussion

Class Period 1:

- As a class, we have finished reading *The Hate U Give* and as a wrap up to the unit we will be discussing the Black Lives Matter movement.
- We will watch the video “Tupac Inspired Angie Thomas’ New Book” to familiarize the students with the author and think about the connections between activism and the novel (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H6ufAb82GJ0>). This video is from Epic Reads (epicreads.com) which is a website dedicated to YA lit. This website itself is a great use for students.

-To gauge student knowledge, I will ask students if they have heard of the Black Lives Matter movement before and explain common misconceptions/oversimplifications about the Black Lives Matter movement. Discussing how bias can affect understanding/research.

-As a class we will listen to two audio clips “Black Lives Matter Slogan Becomes a Bigger Movement” and “Black Lives Matter Founders Describe Paradigm Shift in the Movement” both from NPR.

(<https://www.npr.org/2014/12/04/368408247/black-lives-matter-slogan-becomes-a-bigger-movement>)

(<https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2016/07/13/485895828/black-lives-matter-founders-describe-paradigm-shift-in-the-movement>)

Students will listen to the audio clips and write down some of the things that they learned/taking general notes.

-As a class we will participate in a discussion about the social issues and specific events that lead to the Black Lives Matter movement, its goals from their website, and controversies associated with it. The goal of this discussion is not to debate the necessity or effectiveness of the movement, but rather to come to an understanding of its origin and goals

(<https://blacklivesmatter.com/>). Explain to the students about how literature helps us learn about a wide variety of experiences and perspectives.

-Ask students to think about how the Black Lives Matter movement connects to the novel.

-Students will receive a handout where they will be asked to choose from four topics:

1. Double consciousness, codeswitching, and living multiple identities
2. The Black Panther Party
3. Tupac Shakur as an activist

4. Media coverage of fatal police shootings.

Multiple students will cover each topic, but they will get to choose which topic that they do.

Class Period 2:

-As class begins, remind students of what we discussed yesterday. Students will have chosen which topic they would like to cover, and they will be placed in groups based on who chose which topic. The class will review how to do unbiased, accurate research. They will meet in groups to discuss their research plans. Students will be creating either a Power Point presentation, Google Slides, or a Prezi.

-The students will be given a handout that explains the expectations of the research project. They will need to search the novel as well to pull examples from the text and connect them to their research. They will need to include a Works Cited/references page. They can use Wikipedia to get a general sense of their topic, but they will need to branch off and find other sources as Wikipedia will not count towards their Works Cited page.

-Students will work together to read and take notes on their topic. Students should work together to create their presentation slides.

-These are some possible moments in the text that students should reference for each topic:

1. Black Panther Party (Ch 3, the family's complex political and social alliances to mainstream Christianity, the Nation of Islam, and the Black Panthers; Ch 10, Maverick's assertion that the Panthers educated and empowered; Ch 14, Hailey unfollows Starr's social media for posts about Black Panthers)

2. Double consciousness, code-switching, identity negotiation (Ch 5, Starr talks about changing language use at school; Ch 13, the family discusses what it would mean to move to the suburbs; Ch 17, Starr's white boyfriend accuses her of hiding parts of her life from him)

3. Tupac Shakur and his activism: (Ch 1, Khalil explains how “Tupac was the truth”; Ch 10, the family listens to Tupac and discusses how his work uplifted people of color; Ch 12, Starr watches the video of Tupac explaining the meaning behind T.H.U.G. L.I.F.E.)

4. Media coverage of fatal shootings by police (Ch 7, Khalil is named by news reporters and labeled a “suspected drug dealer”; Ch 14, Officer 115’s father is interviewed on the news; Ch 20, Hailey repeats what she had heard on the news about Khalil)

-The next class period, students will share their findings and present their research.

Class Period 3:

-Students will present the research that they’ve done during the previous class period. Students might be stressed out about a presentation, but the teacher will assure them that while this will be graded, it’s not a large grade. The teacher will emphasize that it’s important to understand how to be relaxed during presentations because it will be helpful for them in the future when it comes to college or jobs. The teacher will go over different presentation techniques, and students can choose to do practice presentations if they wish. It is possible that people are nervous about public speaking because they must speak in front of an audience and students might be nervous about their speaking and language usage being on display. The presentations will take up most of the class period.

-After each group is done with their 8-10 minutes presentation, the teacher will ask the students to discuss how this new knowledge shapes their understandings of the characters and events in the book.

-With the remainder of the time, the teacher will give a preview of what we will be doing next class, which will be reading two important texts by African-American authors: James Baldwin and Ta-Nehisi Coates. The teacher will give a brief background on both authors.

Class Period 4:

-The class will read James Baldwin's essay "Letter to my Nephew" and then parts of Ta-Nehisi Coates' "Letter to My Son," which is itself part of the larger work *Between the World and Me*. We will read parts from both essays out loud as a class but will break up the reading. Students will spend some time reading in groups, then some time reading silently.

-Students will answer questions on a worksheet about both essays. They can either work alone or work in groups. They will be asked to refer back to the two essays, and then think about the connections to their research and *The Hate U Give*.

-If students are interested in this topic and want to learn more about novels that address violence against African Americans, suggest books like *How it Went Down* by Kekla Magoon, *Dear Martin* by Nic Stone, or *All-American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely.

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