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# Developing Social Consciousness through Multicultural Young Adult Literature

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# **Developing Social Consciousness through Multicultural Young Adult Literature**



Honors Thesis

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Department: English

Advisor: Thomas L. Morgan, Ph.D.

April 2014

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## Abstract

In this study, the novels *We Were Here* and *Mexican Whiteboy* by Matt de la Pena and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie, works which feature male protagonists struggling to locate their multicultural identities, will be analyzed. This research will legitimize the use of multicultural young adult literature, specifically these three texts, in the classroom, despite the presence of controversial themes. This research will demonstrate the value of these texts due to their potential to foster social consciousness and aid the establishment of identity within a global context. This thesis will demonstrate ways in which young adult literature can promote social change through both recognition of commonalities and respect for differences.

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Young adult literature is often overlooked and undervalued in relation to literature written for adults. Because of this, teachers in school tend to emphasize the traditional literary canon over young adult texts. While the primary cause of this emphasis is often the perceived literary merit of the canon in comparison with popular, contemporary texts, many other factors play a role as well: young adult literature sometimes includes controversial themes; there are few associations or organizations in place to identify and evaluate good young adult literature; and there is little guidance available to teachers as far as how to teach this literature in comparison to the information available on curriculum involving the classics. However, research increasingly highlights the downsides associated with the classics. Canonical literature fails to engage students, instead deterring them from reading and depriving them of the benefits of proficient literacy skills. Donald Gallo's 2001 article "How Classics Create an Alliterate Society" found that only 20% of students "usually or always liked the assigned books" in high school classes. In a 2012 issue of *English Leadership Quarterly*, students cited "reading selections" and "teacher's close-mindedness toward topics of reading" as negative experiences in their Language Arts courses. The survey concluded that the best way to improve student performance in schools is to engage them to actively take interest in their own learning (Yu). More and more scholars and educators are beginning to recognize the potential value that young adult literature can provide to this process. Adolescents typically connect with these texts more easily than they often do with works traditionally included in schools' curricula. In the middle and high school classroom, selecting texts which maintain teens' interest, many of which are within the young adult genre, will help teachers convince students to keep reading at a time in their lives when many students

stop completing assigned readings and stagnate their literacy development as a result (Harmon 90). Adolescents cannot be convinced to read simply because they should. The best way to engage them is to use books designed to appeal to them, namely those categorized as young adult literature.

Once teachers do identify the value that young adult literature can add to their classrooms, they often find their selection limited due to the controversial themes rampant in such texts, the non-standard diction, or the lesser reputation in comparison with those novels designated as classics (Harmon 92, 98). Controversial topics commonly include suicide, depression, bullying, violence, gangs, prejudice, racism, sexuality, alcohol, drugs, theft, and morally questionable behavior. A further concern is that these topics are often presented in a style which mimics authentic teenage voice; in other words, slang and informal English are used. Many adults, whether acting as parents, teachers, or community members, express strong opinions regarding which literature is appropriate for youth, concerned that some young adult literature may negatively affect adolescents at an impressionable time in their identity formation. Specifically in the genre of young adult literature, books that are considered controversial are often banned publicly by schools or other community organizations (“Banned and Challenged books”). The American Library Association, among other organizations, tracks the most commonly banned books of all time as well as for each year. Within these records, common reasons for the bans are listed. Some of the most common reasons cited in recent years include “offensive language,” “religious viewpoint,” “sexually explicit,” “racism,” and the relatively generic label, “unsuited to age group” (“Banned and

Challenged Books”). Interestingly enough, many of the most commonly banned books also top the bestseller lists, suggesting that these topics appeal to young adults.

Novels in the genre of young adult literature and especially in the sub-genre of multicultural young adult literature are often debased under the pretense that they are popular books – low art. These texts are seen as commercial leisure reading, but they are not seen as worthy of study in the classroom. Occasionally, they are deemed acceptable for middle school students, but they are typically considered unsuitable for the serious analysis of complex texts that is the focus of upper grade levels. Further marginalized is the sub-genre of multicultural young adult literature. These texts are often reserved for reluctant readers. “Reluctant readers” are those whose reading skills lag behind their peers. At the high school level, most students labeled as reluctant readers continue to fall further behind, often because they do not enjoy reading (hence the term “reluctant”). Relegating young adult literature only to reluctant readers suggests that it is inferior to literature taught to whole classes: it may not be worthy of study to those in mainstream classes, but it is okay to give to those who are behind because it is simpler and less complex. When *multicultural* young adult literature is relegated to reluctant readers, because it is seen as something that such readers can relate to better, it is often an indication of a racist assumption that reluctant readers are more likely to be minority students (e.g., Early). Conflating reluctant readers with minority student reinforces the belief that minority students are not supposed to be successful in school, perpetuating cycles where low expectations limit students’ possibilities of achieving success.

Minority students grow in number each year but face a curriculum which excludes, marginalizes, or stereotypes them. This is evidenced by a recent study of

“Book-Length Works Taught in High School English Courses” which found that the most frequently taught books are overwhelmingly dominated by white male authors, and that this list has not changed significantly since a similar study was first done in the 1960’s. In fact, Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* is the only novel in the top ten which was not written by a white male (Applebee). This novel was first published in the 1960’s and is set in the 1930’s. As a result, the racism portrayed in the novel reflects the issues of that time period, issues which are very different than those faced by 21<sup>st</sup> century teens. For example, my tenth grade students recently finished reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* and they quickly pointed out that the racism in the novel was very explicit and very physical, which made it different from contemporary racism. Analyzing this overt racism teaches historical lessons, but it does not adequately prepare students to engage the more subtle psychological racism of the present world. Furthermore, while *To Kill a Mockingbird* does address racial discrimination as a theme, the fact that the subject is approached from a white perspective suggests a larger problem: most high school students are only studying literature, particularly literature dealing with multicultural issues, from the perspective of the dominant, white culture. Whether students are members of the dominant or minority culture, this type of education runs the risk of seriously limiting their worldview.

Contrary to the popular belief that young adult literature has little value to add to the high school classroom, many of the perceived criticisms of multicultural young adult literature are actually some of its greatest assets that make this genre an effective tool for teaching high level literary analysis skills. Multicultural young adult novels are valuable for all teenagers, regardless of gender, culture, or socioeconomic status. Because these



novels are more relatable than the classics, they have the potential to engage students in Language Arts at a time when many of them would otherwise stop doing the reading assigned and thereby would stagnate their own literacy development. Unlike the classics, which have scores of research legitimizing their value, teachers and students must work to discover meaning for themselves when they use contemporary texts. As long as teachers put in the work to understand the novels they teach, this can be an asset for students: students cannot take shortcuts by Googling the summaries, symbols, or themes of a contemporary text. The lack of research surrounding these text forces students to do the high order thinking themselves (with appropriate support from their classroom teacher, of course), offering further opportunities for students to grow. The diverse perspectives offered in multicultural young adult literature, when used in the classroom in a non-marginalized way, can raise students' awareness of contemporary social justice issues and prompt them to analyze their internal biases and assumptions. For students who identify with the main characters in multicultural young adult literature, reading these texts in the classroom validates the legitimacy of their identity, telling them that they matter. For students of other backgrounds, the same lesson transfers, teaching them that all people, regardless of background, matter equally. When used effectively, these novels may be gateways into other literature, but that does not mean the books are not useful on their own. They are valuable in their own right, for the purpose of developing complex thinking skills through accessible and engaging texts. They are more than just opportunities to hook kids on reading; they are opportunities to broaden students' perspectives on the world.

When young adults encounter such controversial topics mentioned above while reading independently, they may not always know how to interpret or respond to them. This leaves the potential that, with an absence of guidance, students may ignore the systemic issues brought up in the novels, or internalize negative attitudes which perpetuate such systemic issues. Alice Trupe argues that when adolescents select their own young adult reading material, they may not find examples of multiculturalism or any other ideas which can help them develop their social consciousness (Harmon). In these cases, young adult literature, particularly that which contains controversial topics, may have little positive value. On the other hand, addressing these novels within the classroom can enhance students' identity development, broaden their cultural perspectives of the world, and provide a framework for analyzing the systemic limitations on opportunity created by racial and class inequalities. These texts can expose students to many possibilities of what their identity can be, illuminate how identities are culturally constructed, help them consider the limits on identity imposed by culture, and empower them to break the mold when establishing their own identity. Young adults can establish a strong sense of self through topics and characters with which they can relate, such as those found throughout young adult literature. They can also develop intercultural awareness by juxtaposing their own experiences with those faced by the characters in multicultural young adult novels to consider situations which are particular to each character's individual experiences. Multicultural young adult literature can be used not only to pique young adults' interest in reading but also to promote tolerance, establish more supportive environments, and break down systemic social barriers which limit individual opportunity and potential.

In this increasingly globalized world, all students will benefit from greater multicultural understanding (Alsup 31). Within Alsup's text on this subject, educator Joy Dangora advocates for African-American literature in Language Arts curriculum. She cites the racial achievement gap and particularly the lapse of African-American males behind other groups in academic performance, identifying "self-concept" and "identity issues" as two contributors to this problem. These students do not always perceive themselves as successful academically, and this problem is exacerbated when students do not see reflections of themselves in the literature they read. Students run the risk of assuming that literature is not "for" them if they feel excluded from the texts they read. Relevant and applicable literature can help correct this problem by better engaging this group of students, as it is the one least served by the current educational curriculum (Alsup 26). As a history teacher, she argues that incorporating African-American young adult literature can help all students, not just African-American students, to develop a greater awareness of the many dimensions of the history of America; furthermore, she argues that the addition of this literature to the curriculum will enhance the ability of students, African-American males in particular, to develop definitive positive perceptions of their own identities due to themes of racial pride and self-worth (Alsup 27). Scholars like Janet Alsup note the challenges of finding effective multicultural literature. Kuo notes other important considerations when selecting such texts: authenticity via the author's background, the complexity of the plot and characters, sufficient detail and complexity within the social issues explored, and finally accurate depiction of cultural features (Alsup 33-36).

Many scholars who advocate for the importance of young adult literature, like those in Alsup and Harmon's texts on the subject, due to their backgrounds in the field of education, emphasize the necessity of maintaining open-ended presentations of literature so that students can develop their own interpretations; therefore, they do not focus on attempting to draw any specific interpretive meaning from the texts they studied. While their teaching strategies may be sound, they either lack the skill set or disregard the close reading skills that literary scholars hone, and in doing so they often fail to give students a purpose for their reading (Wolk). This method of advocating for the value of young adult literature in the classroom often fails, because it fails to demonstrate the complexity which these novels bring to the classroom. To legitimize multicultural young adult literature as worthy of academic study in the classroom, research must analyze these novels according to the principles of academic study of literature. In literature studies, there may not always be one interpretation of a novel; however, any interpretation of a novel is only valid with the proper evidence, developed through close reading, to support such an interpretation. The practice of close reading involves analysis of an author's particular word choice, construction, use of literary devices, and other factors involved in the composition of a work. By exploring denotation, connotation, and implication of the author's choices, literary scholars can draw conclusions regarding various meanings to take from a piece of literature. It is imperative that teachers argue for particular ways of interpreting a text to draw a larger meaning and significance from the work being studied. Teachers should spend time analyzing and evaluating texts to draw specific conclusions from them, and should guide students toward doing the same. Students of literature should be trained to develop critical thinking skills so that they can interpret the novels

they study in the classroom. These skills are increasingly emphasized in high school classrooms (most notably, via the widely adopted Common Core State Standards). Students must approach literature using the high-level skills of Bloom's Taxonomy: analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Teaching students to critique literature by studying its message and perspective builds a framework which students can transfer to their understanding of the world as a whole. Students who are able to think critically about literature will be better prepared to think critically about the world. In literature, students must be trained to evaluate different points of view, to analyze the root causes of systemic social justice issues, to synthesize the effects of these issues, and to draw conclusions about the deeper implications of each text they read. These skills can easily transfer into real world action in combating social justice issues and working toward a more tolerant future. Multicultural young adult novels are great media for making these skills accessible to high school students. Because the novels are targeted toward young adults, the novels engage students easily to set a good framework for students' analysis. At the same time, the novels contain complex ideas and themes which can be broken down and related to significant contemporary issues.

The potential to develop students' social consciousness can be seen in three multicultural young adult novels: *Mexican WhiteBoy* and *We Were Here*, both by Matt de la Peña, and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, written by Sherman Alexie. Authors de la Peña and Alexie write coming-of-age stories featuring male, mixed-race protagonists who struggle to define their own identities in direct conflict with society's expectations for them. According to most psychologists, the teenage years are crucial in the formation of identity; therefore novels which feature this discovery process

as a central theme are particularly relevant. These stories each go beyond that by exploring how social constructs such as race, appearance, and even socioeconomic status limit possibilities available when developing identity. The protagonists of each of these novels illuminate the complexity of social justice issues facing minorities. Using frank, humorous, honest, and relatable narration, the authors explore how racial and socioeconomic biases influence identity development to demonstrate the limitations created by systemic racism.

## **The Influence of Racism on Potential Identities**

Students can read and critique novels with themes of multiculturalism to gain a better understanding of their own process of identity formation, and the societal limitations imposed upon this process. One great example of this comes in Matt de la Peña's novels. His book *Mexican WhiteBoy* features a protagonist, Danny, who identifies as half Mexican and half white. The boy grows up in an affluent neighborhood, attending a primarily white school, and struggles to assimilate while at the same time striving to preserve his Mexican heritage. Danny's self-reflections throughout the book evidence this conflict. At the beginning of the book, de la Peña pits Danny's dual identities as mutually exclusive. Danny struggles with feelings of dislocation between his two homes: Leucadia, where he resides with his mother, and National City, where he visits his extended family on his father's side. Matt de la Peña uses Danny's journey towards empowerment to demonstrate the limitations created by narrowly-defined ethnic stereotypes.

Throughout the novel, Danny tries to fit in as both a teenager and as a Mexican American. Layering these two struggles on top of each other makes the issue of racism more accessible to teenagers. One example of this comes when Danny strives to be accepted by his peers via the way he dresses. At one point, Danny is with his cousin, Sophia, with her friends Raul, Lolo, and Carmen, when Carmen compliments Danny for being dressed nicely. De la Peña narrates Danny's reaction as follows: "Danny smiles, but he knows she's just trying to make him feel good. He digs his nails into his forearm as he listens to a little more small talk between Sofia and her friends. Then on the sly he peeks down at his collar shirt. His Vans. He looks at Raul and Lolo. T-shirt and jeans. Timberlands. He needs to buy new clothes" (de la Peña 59). Rather than accepting Carmen's compliment, Danny immediately sees it as disingenuous: "she's just trying to make him feel good." Danny describes his own outfit and then immediately compares it to those worn by his peers. He uses his apparel to mark the distinct differences which isolate him from the group. He states that he "needs" to buy new clothes, indicating something that is a necessity. For teenagers, acceptance into social groups is a priority. In this passage, author de la Peña highlights Danny's belief that clothing is the primary factor separating him from the other characters whose acceptance he desires.

However, this struggle to gain acceptance becomes even more complicated in multicultural literature due to the racial markers which seem to isolate the main characters these novels. The novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* written by Sherman Alexie examines this isolation from the perspective of a teenage boy who lives on a Native American reservation, but decides to attend high school in the nearby white community of Rearden. The main character, who goes by either Junior or

Arnold, attempts to conform to conflicting cultural expectations in the context of his school community and his home community. Author Sherman Alexie gives Junior a sarcastic and blunt voice with which to address the issues he faces. For example, in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, when Junior rhetorically asks “How do I make a beautiful white girl fall in love with me?” he then speculates the answer to be, “The first thing you have to do is change the way you look, the way you talk, and the way you walk. And then she’ll think you’re her fricking Prince Charming” (Alexie 81). In this quote, the steps listed in the process, “change the way you look, the way you talk, and the way you walk,” are described as if they are straightforward and easy to accomplish. The phrase “and then” further reinforces the idea that these changes are simple to implement. However, the word “fricking” denotes the character’s obvious sarcasm, adding humor to the selection. The final comparison to “Prince Charming” also denotes a fictional, and therefore unachievable, ideal. Ultimately, the conclusion in this passage is that it is impossible for Junior to attain love from a white girl because what she desires would require him to look, talk, and walk differently. However, Junior’s cultural differences prevent these changes from being possible. Cultural biases create barriers to fitting in. Using this text or others, students in a classroom space could begin to reflect on their own desires to fit in, the barriers they face in attempting to fit in, and the barriers they may subconsciously impose that prevent others from fitting in. Bringing these normalized processes into the conscious, examined space of the classroom can open up opportunities for increased tolerance of difference.

Returning to *Mexican WhiteBoy*, author de la Peña reveals the further complications his main character faces because he wants to fit in to multiple



communities. At the beginning of the novel, this tension is established through the description:

And Danny's brown. Half-Mexican brown. A shade darker than all the white kids at his private high school, Leucadia Prep. Up there, Mexican people do under-the-table yard work and hide out in the hills because they're in San Diego illegally. Only other people on Leucadia's campus who share his shade are the lunch-line ladies, the gardeners, the custodians (de la Peña 2).

Danny describes the difference between himself and his classmates with the word "shade." A "shade" is a small, minute difference. The word "all" collectivizes an entire group. Danny's peers are grouped because of their whiteness as all being the same. The idea of a "private school" suggests exclusion of outsiders, attributing superiority to those who do belong there. To Danny, his peers are grouped together and he is positioned as an outsider, all because of one shade of difference. In the next sentence, the word "hide" and the word "illegally" demonstrate the negative connotation associated with Mexicans. The word "share" suggests commonality and a bond. Danny is set up as sharing commonality with those who are hiding illegally as well as with "lunch line ladies, gardeners, and custodians." These workers are seen as lower class, less skilled, menial laborers and therefore inferior to the academically and economically successful students at Danny's exclusive private school. Danny does not belong with his peers, and he is seen as inferior via his association with those who have a similar skin color. Danny is an outsider to whites and is positioned instead as similar to those who "share his shade."

Juxtaposed with Danny's feeling of displacement at school is a similar feeling when he goes to visit cousins on his Mexican side of the family. De la Peña explains,

“whenever Danny comes down here to National City—where his dad grew up, where all his aunts and uncles and cousins still live—he feels pale. A full shade lighter. Albino almost” (2). In contrast to Danny’s earlier concerns, in this context he feels “pale.” Paleness often has a negative connotation because it is viewed as a lack of color. The idea of “shade,” a minimal difference, is reinforced but juxtaposed with the word “full,” or very. Juxtaposing “shade” with “full” emphasizes the significance of this seemingly small difference. In this new context, Danny once again feels out-of-place due to his skin color, but it is his half-white identity rather than his half-Mexican identity which causes him to feel inferior, a reversal of his earlier concerns.

These feelings of inferiority and dislocation escalate when Danny is around his peers in National City:

Angela and Bee comb Danny over with their almond-shaped eyes, devour his out-of-place surfer style like a pack of rabid dogs. Danny cringes at how different he must seem to his cousin’s friends. They’re all dark chocolate-colored, hair sprayed up, dressed in pro jerseys and Dickies, Timberlands. Gold and silver chains. Calligraphy-style tats. Danny’s skin is too clean, too light, his clothes too soft” (de la Peña 3).

Like many teenagers attempting to conform to social norms, Danny fixates on differences in the way these teenagers dress: “pro jerseys and Dickies, Timberlands. Gold and silver chains.” More telling, however, are the differences in appearance that he layers into his observations. At the beginning of the quote, Danny identifies the girls’ “almond-shaped eyes.” Later in the quote he describes them as “dark chocolate-colored.” At first, Danny is described as “out-of-place” because of his “surfer style.” “Style” seems like a

conscious choice, indicating that Danny has agency over his appearance and therefore the ability to change to fit in. However, at the end of the quote, it is noted that “Danny’s skin is too clean, too light.” Danny’s deficits which keep him from fitting in are in fact outside of his control because they are racial. In order to truly fit in, the biases which view skin shade as a “difference” must be changed. Studying this novel in the classroom offers students the opportunity to become aware of the many nuances in the main character’s feelings of displacement and exclusion. Working through these nuances with students can provide an avenue for confronting the assumptions that define certain characters as different in different contexts. Analysis of the characters in the novel can then be transferred to analysis of racism and stereotyping in the real world. Ideally, this work will increase students’ understanding of how culturally-labeled differences limit the ability to be accepted into social groups.

Gaining acceptance is not the only challenge faced by teens as they attempt to establish identity. At the same time as teenagers work to fit in, they often desire to stand out as well by achieving success and admiration. Sherman Alexie’s novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* captures the common feelings of young adults striving toward dreams. The main character of Alexie’s book, Junior, is an Indian living on a reservation. He lacks the warrior traits which he feels will determine his status within the tribe, and spends the novel attempting to find a space in his world where he feels valued. He expresses a desire common to many teens when he says, “I draw because I want to talk to the world. And I want the world to pay attention to me. I feel important with a pen in my hand. I feel like I might grow up to be somebody important. An artist. Maybe a famous artist. Maybe a rich artist” (Alexie 6). To “pay attention” to something conveys

importance placed upon that object. Junior's desire to "feel important" is a desire for validation. Junior wants to feel like he matters to other people. Especially for teenagers, self-worth is often measured as a result of the worth attributed by other people. The desire to be "famous" and "rich" indicate socially accepted markers of success. Junior wants to be successful according to the popularly held standards of being rich and famous. This desire to succeed is central for many teenagers. Because they are growing up and preparing to graduate high school, they are expected to dream about what career they want to pursue and what they want to do with their life: in other words, they are exploring their dreams and the possibilities of achieving them.

Alexie highlights the universal nature of his narrator's quest to achieve his dreams by examining the barriers which Junior and his white classmates both face. He narrates a conversation between Junior and his schoolmate, Penelope, when he asks her about her dreams:

"Why don't you quit talking in dreams and tell me what you really want to do with your life," I said. "Make it simple."

"I want to go to Stanford and study architecture."

"Wow, that's cool," I said. "But why architecture?"

"Because I want to build something beautiful. Because I want to be remembered."

And I couldn't make fun of her for that dream. It was my dream, too. And Indian boys weren't supposed to dream like that. And white girls from small towns weren't supposed to dream big, either. We were supposed to be happy with

our limitations. But there was no way Penelope and I were going to sit still. Nope, we both wanted to fly (Alexie 112).

In this passage, Penelope expresses the desire to “be remembered.” The concept links back to Junior’s desire for validation from other people. Both teenagers crave recognition that they matter. Junior acknowledges his empathy for her with the statement, “It was my dream, too.” Junior and Penelope, despite differences in their backgrounds, share similar dreams, dreams which are echoed by most teenagers. They can empathize with each other due to their shared aspirations. Most teenagers will be able to empathize with Junior and Penelope’s aspirations as well. Sherman Alexie appeals universally to teenagers by capturing the desire to be successful and important.

However, Alexie quickly turns the universal idea of dreams into an exploration of the particular barriers which restrict them. In the passage above, Junior elaborates on his predicament with the statement, “And Indian boys weren’t supposed to dream like that. And white girls from small towns weren’t supposed to dream big, either. We were supposed to be happy with our limitations” (Alexie 112). The subject “Indian boys” collectivizes Junior into a category with others who share his ethnicity and gender. The word “supposed” sets expectations which are imposed on the characters. Junior acknowledges that, due to his race and gender, he is not expected to have a dream or to be successful. He then considers Penelope, collectivizing her into the group “white girls from small towns.” This shows that both gender and location play a role in imposing limitations onto dreams. Alexie clearly labels the systemic assumptions which influence teenagers’ motivation to pursue their dreams. Motivation decreases when the expectation of success is low. For both of these characters in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-*

*Time Indian*, others' low expectations for them threaten to prevent them from even pursuing their dreams. These low expectations are all based on the role models and examples of success and failure which the characters are exposed to and expected to emulate. Because others with similar backgrounds have not been successful, there is little aspiration for the success of future generations with similar attributes. In the classroom, students can consider what has influenced their own dreams and their own expectations for success, in comparison to those dreams present in the novel. This will help students identify factors which limited their own dreams and which limited the characters' dreams, factors which they may have had little awareness of otherwise.

Of course, there is a further nuance to Junior's desire to achieve success in both of the above passages. Alexie's character expresses this relatable desire to be valued, but he also emphasizes how his race affects his desire. He qualifies his dream with this sentiment:

[Drawing is] the only way I can become rich and famous. Just take a look at the world. Almost all of the rich and famous brown people are artists. They're singers and actors and writers and dancers and directors and poets. So I draw because I feel like it might be my only real chance to escape the reservation. (Alexie 6)

Junior instructs readers to "take a look at the world." When exploring dreams, teenagers often look to role models to determine what possibilities are achievable for them. Junior fixates on "rich and famous brown people," or minorities who have achieved success. He is looking for reflections of himself, role models with identities similar to his because they share his skin color and background. He explains why he does this by saying "I feel like it might be my only real chance to escape the reservation." "Only" indicates a

limitation. The word “real” describes an attempt to be practical and grounded while dreaming. Junior looks to ethnic role models to determine which of his dreams are realistic. He believes that to achieve success, he should emulate those who have already done so. Alexie describes this chasing of dreams using the word “escape” in reference to the reservation. The word “escape” carries a connotation of oppression and entrapment. To Junior, the reservation is a place of imprisonment and therefore success can only be achieved by leaving it. As a teenager, Junior (like the protagonists of the other two novels) does not have the power to effect systemic changes in the power structures which oppress him as a reservation Indian. However, he can see that the reservation is a prison and that his only hope at being successful is leaving. In the classroom setting, this juxtaposition of hope and hopelessness, of opportunity and limitation, can be explored by considering what choices were available to Junior and what choices and opportunities were unavailable to him, and other characters in the novel. This type of analysis offers a new perspective on the systemic factors which either promote or prevent success, something most high school students are unaware of.

For many minority teens, white-dominated spaces are seen as the primary places of hope and success. This idea is echoed in *Mexican WhiteBoy*. The main character, Danny, hopes to become a star baseball player. He explains why he believes this dream is achievable with the observation, “In every other part of life [white people] run shit, just like his old man always says, but not when it comes to sports. You just have to look at the games on TV. Almost everybody is dark. Black, Mexican, Dominican, whatever. But barely anybody is white” (de la Peña 77). The phrase “run shit,” in addition to appealing to teens’ standard vernacular, is a blunt and simple way of calling attention to perceptions

of power and authority. Danny sees white people as those in power and he associates this power with being successful. The word “but” denotes an exception to Danny’s assertion: “sports.” The dichotomy between “every other part of life” and “sports” highlights the limited spaces where people of color have authority and power. This is followed by second-person narration with the word “you” which speaks directly to readers, giving them an instruction. Like Junior did, Danny also calls his readers to reflect on what they see around them. This writing style gives teachers an opportunity to ask their students to be reflective in the classroom as well. The phrase “on TV” directs consideration to the media. Perception via media is often accepted as reality, whether or not its images are accurate. For Danny, this perception serves to limit his dreams. He strives to be a successful baseball player because he believes it is one of few opportunities for him to become successful and powerful. In the classroom, students can dissect this character’s dreams and the logic behind them to examine how role models function to encourage and deter people from pursuing their goals. Particularly, students can examine the presence and absence of minority role models in various spheres of life to consider how ethnicity influences the pursuit of goals.

Another novel which explores similar themes is Matt de la Peña’s *We Were Here*. In *We Were Here*, the main character, Miguel, who is half white and half Mexican, explores the effects that his race has had on his identity development. He often focuses on how his race has decided his destiny for him, imposing limits on his ability to achieve certain dreams. At the beginning of the novel, Miguel has just received a sentence for a crime, the nature of which is not revealed until the end of the novel. Miguel’s sentence is to serve time in a group home. Partway through the novel he and two of his housemates



decide to run away from the home. At one point, Miguel finds himself at Venice Beach, watching surfers, and he observes, “fifty percent of me was the exact same as these guys. I bet if I’d have had a white pop instead of a Mexican one I’d be sitting out there too. On my board, fingers dangling in the water, watching for when another good wave might come. I’m not even playing, if we’d have had a white old man me and Diego’s lives would be totally different from how they are now” (de la Peña 200). The description “fifty percent” suggests an ability to divide something neatly in half. The words “exact same” align two things as identical. Miguel views his identity as split into two distinct halves, one of which fits completely within a white context and the other of which belongs in a Mexican context. The word “if” sets up a hypothetical situation. Miguel compares his current situation to the one he desires, identifying his Mexican dad as the cause of his circumstances. Imagining his life as “totally different” indicates a huge impact. For Miguel, ethnicity often seems like an insurmountable barrier which prevents him from dreaming. Rather than attempting to develop a sense of agency over some portion of his life, Miguel fixates on what is beyond his control and often resigns himself to being a victim of his circumstances. According to Martin Covington’s Self Worth Theory, often cited by educators, his attitude could be labeled “failure accepting” (Covington). The concept of failure acceptance, along with other attitudes that students may hold about success, can be taught explicitly and intentionally in conjunction with the novel *We Were Here* to help students understand the external factors which cause these various attitudes to develop, and to help students become introspective regarding their own attitudes about success. It is important to demonstrate to students that external factors do play a role in accomplishments, as Miguel observes, but also to empower

students to transcend and work to change the assumptions and structures which limit success. These lessons can help students gain a realistic perspective on what is and is not within their control and how to set goals with this knowledge in mind.

Like the main characters in *Mexican WhiteBoy* and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Miguel in *We Were Here* does occasionally show positive attitudes about working toward a dream. He also sees his ethnicity as a deciding factor in whether his dreams are realistic. As Miguel continues to watch the surfers on the beach, he considers, “It almost made me wanna try it someday. Was there such thing as a Mexican surfer? Not on this beach, I know, but on other ones? Like what about in Mexico? There had to be Mexican surfers in that resort part Mong told us about. I decided maybe that’s what I’d do when me and Rondell finally got down there. Become a surfer” (201). The words “almost” and “someday” show uncertainty. Miguel fears pursuing his dreams too definitively because he fears failing. “Such thing” implies that there is a good possibility something does not exist, and if it does it is very uncommon. Miguel’s question, “was there such thing as a Mexican surfer?” shows that he is looking for a role model to follow but does not even know if they exist, as if a “Mexican surfer” is a mythical creature. The phrase “had to be” demonstrates a hope that a notion is correct. Miguel holds out hope that the Mexican surfers he imagines do exist. His dream is only attainable if he has role models to emulate; otherwise Miguel believes that it is impossible for him to become a surfer because of his ethnicity.

In each of these novels, the main characters look to role models to determine their identities. Like all teenagers, they have big dreams for their future. Due to their particular situations, the characters often feel limited in terms of the possibilities that are available

to them. These novels highlight the way that role models influence teens to either pursue or give up on their dreams, and by extension highlight the importance of seeing positive role models that reflect dreams one has for oneself. In the high school classroom, students can critique these novels to learn about how they develop their own dreams and how assumptions influence the dreams they have for themselves. They can begin to recognize how stereotypes play out in the pursuance of dreams, and can consider the potential consequences of accepting and rejecting such stereotypes. Furthermore, they can learn to empathize with others who feel excluded from certain dreams and can learn to fight to break the barriers which cause such exclusion.

These young adult novels use the familiar teen focus on identity formation to examine the role of race and ethnicity in the formation of identity. For students who are minorities, these novels can provide much-needed support as they work through their own identity formation process, helping them to consider the ways in which racism imposes limits on their identity, and helping them to reject those limits to the extent they can. For students who may never have considered these issues, reading young adult novels with multicultural themes offers the opportunity to develop awareness and empathy by relating issues of racism to issues of fitting in more generally. Raising awareness of racism in the classroom setting can help diminish the negative effects of stereotypes, improving tolerance and acceptance in the world.

## **Mirrored Marginalization of Young Adults and Minorities**

Another recurring theme in *Mexican WhiteBoy*, *We Were Here*, and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is that of the protagonists' quests to achieve autonomy. This quest for autonomy is a natural step in teenagers' development, as they

gain more responsibility and independence and become less reliant on their parents. While attempting to gain autonomy, young adults are often dismissed by the adults in their lives, and the main characters in *Mexican WhiteBoy*, *We Were Here*, and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* all experience this within the novels. For these protagonists, their age is not the only thing holding them back during their attempts to gain autonomy. There is a second dimension to these characters' marginalization: their race and factors related to race often exacerbate the marginalization they already face as young adults. As these characters explore this marginalization, they illuminate many contemporary social justice issues which negatively affect minorities. For high school students, whether they identify with the majority or minority cultures, these social justice issues may be too overwhelming to explore in the abstract. By studying these issues through the lens of the marginalization which they experience as teenagers, students can increase their understanding of the implications of racism by connecting it with feelings of marginalization that they have personally experienced.

In *Mexican WhiteBoy*, communication and language play a role in Danny's establishment of a sense of self. Danny's attempts to gain agency over his identity reflect the process most teens go through as they grow from children into adults. This makes the novel *Mexican WhiteBoy* particularly relatable to teenagers who may be struggling with issues similar to those Danny faces, as they too are discovering and establishing identities as budding adults. De la Peña gives this journey into adulthood another dimension by writing about the tension between Danny's dual identities as "white" and "Mexican." For Danny, race and appearance become more factors of his identity over which he has no control—factors which contribute to his feeling of marginalization. In classroom

discussion of de la Peña's novel, the connection between establishing agency as a teenager and establishing agency as a minority can be made explicitly to help students of all backgrounds develop empathy toward the challenges created by stereotypes.

Throughout much of the story, Danny is almost silent, refusing to talk unless absolutely necessary and saying as little as possible when forced to speak. Near the beginning of the novel, de la Peña narrates, "Back in Leucadia, [Danny] made a pact with himself. No more words. Or as few as he could possibly get away with. When his dad spoke at all, he mostly spoke Spanish, but Danny never learned. All he had was his mom's English. And he didn't want that anymore" (16). The phrase "at all" indicates a rare occurrence. "His dad" evokes the idea of a male role model to look up to and emulate. Silence and very infrequent speech are attributes of Danny's father, attributes which Danny hopes to embody to be more like his father. Danny makes "a pact with himself." This is an attempt to exercise agency. Choosing to be silent, to avoid communicating, is something over which Danny has control. He is attempting to be like his father, by limiting his speech. Danny's desire to emulate his father, his male role model, is something that most teens can easily relate to. This literal vocal silence reflects the larger problem by paralleling his life which he feels he has no control over. This creates a disconnect in Danny's relationship with his father. He lacks a positive male role model who is present and supportive of him; this hinders his identity development. He feels powerless in this relationship and seeks agency and control via silence. However, this silence is detrimental, merely perpetuating miscommunication and increasing the lack of understanding between various characters in the novel. Studying the novel shows

the importance of communication and building open relationships where members are valued and their voices heard.

In Danny's particular case, communication has another dimension because Danny's family communicates using multiple languages: Danny associates silence with his father, but he also associates Spanish with his father. Danny "never learned" Spanish, which makes him feel illegitimate in his Mexican identity. Because he cannot use the Spanish language to reach his Mexican identity, he adopts silence, the other attribute he associates with his father, to attempt to become closer with his Mexican identity. He finds it impossible to be like his father in many ways, but this is one thing he can do despite differences in his appearance and even upbringing. The language barrier created between Danny's English and his father's bilingualism makes Danny feel like he is responsible for the void in communication with his father.

On the opposite side of Danny's relationship with his father is his relationship with his mother. The word "mom's" indicates possessive ownership. Danny associates his primary language, English, with his mother. English is the dominant language while Spanish is looked at as inferior in comparison: it is a language of immigrants, of outsiders to the U.S. Danny sets up a dichotomy between his dad's Spanish and silence and his mom's English and expression. The languages they speak equate to their identities. Danny's association of Spanish with silence perpetuates the marginalization of that minority voice. When he says "all he had," Danny shows that he feels he is lacking something vital. Not being able to speak Spanish makes Danny feel inferior in contrast with his father. When de la Peña says, "he didn't want that anymore," he shows Danny's attempt to reject his mother's language and along with it her identity. In *Mexican*

*WhiteBoy*, speech and language become metaphors for ethnic identity. Danny feels forced to choose between his mom's white identity and his dad's Mexican identity. At first, through his silence, Danny attempts to reject them both in order to exercise control over his identity. However, giving up his voice marginalizes Danny rather than empowering him. While the choice between his two identities may be a false one, the fact that Danny feels he must choose illuminates the way racism seems to force either assimilation or segregation. Students should explore both dimensions of Danny's linguistic conflict: they can first explore the universal issue of voice and agency, but can then look at how multi-lingual communities have more complicated relationships with language.

In Danny's case, his relationship with languages becomes more complex whenever Danny travels from one community to another. Tension is created by the fact that his mastery of the dominant language, English, gives Danny superiority over his other family members. In the novel, language becomes associated with power. Mastery of certain languages gives Danny power in certain contexts, while it limits his power in other contexts. The association between language and power is presented in circumstances that ring familiar to teens, making it easy for them to make this connection. The complexity of the association between power and language makes it a topic worthy of study in a high school classroom focused on high-level critical thinking.

For Danny in *Mexican WhiteBoy*, his sense of displacement haunts him throughout the novel, while he spends the summer visiting his father's family in National City. He reflects on his predicament:

No matter how many words he defines or love letters he composes or pieces of junk mail he reads aloud to his grandma while she waters spider plants potted in

old Folgers coffee cans, he'll still be a hundred miles away from who he's supposed to be. He's Mexican, because his family's Mexican, but he's not really Mexican. His skin is dark like his grandma's sweet coffee, but his insides are as pale as the cream she mixes in. Danny holds the pencil above the paper, thinking: I'm a white boy among Mexicans, and a Mexican among white boys. (de la Peña 90)

The actions “defines,” “composes,” and “reads” all require mastery of language, particularly reading and writing. Danny's mastery of the English language makes him valuable to his Mexican family members, because he is able to assist them in the listed tasks which require mastery of the dominant language. Danny's skill with the dominant language should give him power in the context of his Mexican family. The use of the expression “a hundred miles away” hearkens to the location of his ancestors, Mexico, which Danny is metaphorically and physical unable to reach because he is in America, and because he has grown up in a predominantly affluent white neighborhood. The phrase “supposed to be” suggests a destined path which one must follow. The idea of “really” brings up authenticity, which Danny believes he lacks. The path Danny imagines for himself, as an authentic Mexican, is unobtainable for him. Danny's blended ethnicities are a roadblock, preventing him from feeling comfortable in any identity. He uses a metaphor, comparing his skin to coffee but his “insides” to cream. The juxtaposition of “coffee” and cream,” however, foreshadows the potential to mix two identities just as the two liquids can be mixed together. Danny describes his predicament in the form of a chiasmus, “I'm a white boy among Mexicans, and a Mexican among white boys.” In this chiasmus, the word “boy” is used, which gives connotations of youth,



immaturity, and often inferiority. His choice to call himself a “white boy” shows that Danny values his Mexican identity more highly than his white identity, in contrast to the value that society affords to whiteness. Danny’s ability to verbalize his predicament suggests that he has become acutely aware of exactly why he feels so out-of-place, but he feels unable to find a solution to his continual feeling of marginalization.

Danny feels uncomfortable with the privileges afforded to him due to his upbringing. His assimilation into white culture has come at the cost of his ability to fit in to Mexican culture. Society typically affords superiority on those who have assimilated into white culture, like Danny, but Danny refuses to accept this assimilation as power. Instead, he often feels ashamed of the qualities valued by white society. This idea is echoed when he explains, “The very things Grandma gushes over are what shame him most. Such a good little boy. Such a pretty boy. Look at him doing all his homework before bed, studying for that big English midterm, taking out the trash without even being asked” (47). He further acknowledges his apprehension about his family members who treat him with admiration for his white upbringing, by noting that:

They all genuinely want him to succeed, to rise above the family history. Be the first Lopez to go to college. Come back one Mother’s Day as a doctor or a lawyer or a dentist. A wealthy businessman. Hey look everybody, it’s Professor Lopez! Look at him, Grams! The son of a bitch is pulling up in a *brand-new* Lexus! But at the same time, he bets they subconsciously resent him, too. He’s almost sure of it. (48)

The phrase “rise above” signifies overcoming a challenge and doing something positive. Danny’s Mexican family members appear to value Danny’s assimilation into white

culture, but they themselves have held onto their Mexican identities. By pitting the two identities as superior and inferior, a conflict is created in the choice between the two. For Danny, accepting the values of one culture means rejecting the values of the other culture, something which is not actually possible for Danny to do. In a high school classroom, Danny's predicament can be used to consider why aspects of some cultures become stereotyped and declared as either superior or inferior to other cultures. Students can consider the tensions this creates, especially as the globalized world becomes increasingly multicultural. Students should be encouraged to analyze the value which Danny sees in his Mexican heritage, and by extension the value in all particular cultures, and to consider why this value is often overlooked due to the assumption that assimilation is best because it affords the most privilege.

The idea of privilege and power is echoed by Miguel in *We Were Here*. At one point in the novel, he finds himself at the border between the US and Mexico, and he looks at a Mexican boy, across the fence from him, reflecting on the similarities and differences between the two:

I felt like a damn poser. 'Cause why was he on the Mexico side of the fence, and I was on the American side? How'd it happen like this? If our country's really so much better than Mexico, like everybody says – 'cause we got more money and better schools and better hospitals and less people get sick just by drinking the water – then why should I be here and not him? Why was I on the better side of this big-ass fence? Just 'cause my moms is white? 'Cause of the story my pop always told me, how gramps snuck through a sewage drain, crawled in

everybody's piss and shit, just to make it to America? But that's nothing to do with me. What did *I* do? And what did this kid selling clay suns *not* do? (218)

Miguel calls himself a “poser.” The word “poser” has negative connotations of being fake or trying to be something other than what one is. He sees his identity as inauthentic. He asks “Why was I on the better side of this big-ass fence?” The question, “why,” searches for reason, logic, or justification of Miguel’s predicament. Miguel says, “What did *I* do?” with emphasis on the word “I” to focus on himself alone. The word “do” suggests an action. Miguel thinks that his place in America should be a reward for something good that he personally has done, believing that there must be a logical reason why he deserves to be in America, where there is hope and success. Miguel answers his own question by reflecting on his “moms,” “pop,” and “gramps,” or his family members’ actions. The answer to his rhetorical question is that he has done nothing to deserve his privilege; it is a result of actions taken by his ancestors. He feels undeserving of the privilege he has when he sees the boy in Mexico and recognizes that neither of them are any better than the other. In this exchange, Miguel identifies the arbitrary nature of privilege and opportunity and recognizes that he is simply lucky to have been born in America.

Similarly, Sherman Alexie’s Junior has a moment of recognizing his own privilege toward the end of the novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. He realizes that by moving to a new school, he has transcended some of the issues associated with poverty, by himself becoming part of the privileged group, but that all the issues he has escaped still exist back on his reservation:

I realized that my team, the Reardan Indians, was Goliath. I mean, jeez, all of the seniors on our team were going to college. All of the guys on our team had their

own cars. All of the guys on our team had iPods and cell phones and PSPs and three pairs of blue jeans and ten shirts and mothers and fathers who went to church and had good jobs. Okay, so maybe my white teammates had problems, serious problems, but none of them were life threatening. But I looked over at the Wellpinit Redskins, at Rowdy. I knew that two or three of those Indians might not have eaten breakfast that morning. No food in the house. I knew that seven or eight of those Indians lived with drunken mothers and fathers. I knew that one of those Indians had a father who dealt crack and meth. I knew two of those Indians had fathers in prison. I knew that none of them was going to college. Not one of them. (195)

Junior identifies the immense privilege of his teammates by listing their possessions, highlighting the materialistic nature of success. He juxtaposes this with the Indians' problems, starvation, alcoholism, drug abuse, imprisonment, and lack of education. Junior's use of the first person collective, "my team" and "our team," shows that he has become an accepted member of that group. By fitting in with his white teammates, he has begun associating himself with success, and juxtaposing himself with the problems and failure he identifies on the other team, the reservation Indians. Junior has achieved success via leaving the reservation, but he becomes aware that the problems he left behind still exist. Junior's act of recognizing his own privilege demonstrates empathy. Junior sees that there is little chance for the Indians left on the reservation to succeed, and it is due not to any inferiority on the part of the Indians themselves, but to the many systemic problems which surround them on a daily basis.

In each of these three novels, the exercise of recognizing one's own privilege is central to the main character's journey into wisdom. Readers of these novels can similarly use the characters' discoveries to gain awareness of their own privilege as well as their own powerlessness. This process creates empathy. People in positions of dominance often do not think about their dominance, while only the marginalized are truly aware of their marginalization. Asking students to identify areas in which they have power and dominance can help them become more aware of the marginalization that happens regularly in their world. Making an explicit conscious effort to be aware of marginalization is a good strategy for promoting tolerance for difference.

These characters exemplify the marginalization which is characteristic not only of teenagers but also of minorities. This mirrored marginalization is something that all teenagers can learn to relate to; this can help them understand the condition of minorities in a way that makes sense to them in order to push their awareness of the way the world works. Many educational theorists agree that relating new learning to prior knowledge is the best way to anchor a lesson so that it is memorable to students. The concept of marginalization of minorities in a community can become familiar through comparisons with marginalization of teenagers by adults. Multicultural young adult literature, rife with themes of this dual marginalization, provides a venue for analyzing these parallel problems.

## **Building Students' Awareness and Empathy**

Ideally, students who engage with these texts in the classroom will work toward greater acceptance of the multifaceted dimensions of identity, and will come to reject the

limitations created by narrowly-defined stereotypes. In these novels, students can see concrete examples of the identity development and marginalization as experienced by multicultural characters. They can relate these characters' experiences to their own to gain greater awareness of and empathy for the predicaments caused by racism.

Additionally, as a result of this increased awareness, students can work to break down the barriers and limitations that create and perpetuate such racism. The process of defying restrictive stereotyping and binary power dynamics seems to be the best solution for the characters in *We Were Here*, *Mexican WhiteBoy*, and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*.

By the end of *Mexican WhiteBoy*, Danny has transformed into a confident individual who feels more accepted both at school and around his Mexican family members. He has learned to navigate the shared space between his white identity and his Mexican identity. In Danny's case, it is not universalism which prevails, but becoming closer to his Mexican roots. He rejects some of the stereotypes of both of his identities: for example, the notion that a Mexican cannot wear preppy clothes, or that he cannot be a Mexican if he doesn't speak Spanish. While navigating dualism in identity is an ongoing process, Danny gains the self-confidence to accept that he does not need to conform to the traditional definitions of either identity, but must learn to self-define his identity. Identity must be self-established rather than based on other's approval for validation. Since adolescents are in the midst of their own identity development process, reading a book with a similar journey can help them discover their own agency and empowerment.

The best example of empowerment through acceptance of multiple identities comes from Junior at the end of Sherman Alexie's novel. He discovers:

I realized that I might be a lonely Indian boy, but I was not alone in my loneliness. There were millions of other Americans who had left their birthplaces in search of a dream. I realized that, sure, I was a Spokane Indian. I belonged to that tribe. But I also belonged to the tribe of American immigrants. And to the tribe of basketball players. And to the tribe of bookworms. And the tribe of cartoonists. And the tribe of chronic masturbators. And the tribe of teenage boys. And the tribe of small-town kids. And the tribe of Pacific Northwesterners. And the tribe of tortilla chips-and-salsa lovers. And the tribe of poverty. And the tribe of funeral-goers. And the tribe of beloved sons. And the tribe of boys who really missed their best friends. It was a huge realization. (217)

Junior identifies himself as a member of many “tribes” and labels his identity as multidimensional as a result. This process shows that the choice between various identities is a false one, yet it is one that many people still feel forced to make as they attempt to assimilate or reject assimilation. According to many post-modernists, societal changes have replaced the historically unchanging community and family with contemporary dislocation and rootlessness. This leads many adolescents to feel displaced and disconnected. The transient nature of society has led identity formulation to be created based on actions and experiences rather than located in unchanging traditions and backgrounds (Bean). Globalism has further complicated identities in the increasing number of cross-cultural identities that exist. As more and more cultures become interconnected, many adolescents must establish ways to merge identities with aspects of multiple cultures (Bean). Fostering a more global understanding among adolescents generally will help to establish that diverse cultural identities are combinable rather than

mutually exclusive. Greater acceptance of these new hybrid identities will prevent detachment, isolation, and conflict often experienced by adolescents who struggle to merge distinct identities. The novels *Mexican WhiteBoy*, *We Were Here*, and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* provide a venue for developing students' understanding of diversity.

Like scholar Melissa Hasbrook notes, adolescents cannot be expected to focus only on assimilation and commonalities, at the risk of ignoring differences. This is what happens in classrooms that focus solely on the white male dominated literary canon. This attitude promotes conformity and treats non-assimilating minorities as a threat. Furthermore, Hasbrook discusses "multiculturalism" as it is presented in schools today. She argues that the contemporary version merely tokenizes and makes use of international stereotypes to teach children about that which is "other." Since nationalities are not homogenous, this outlook becomes problematic for anyone whose identity does not fit the stereotypical category that people expect it to. Instead, teachers must learn to promote the collective identity, a concept which accepts the complexity of varied experiences, navigating universalism and particularism (Harmon 75). When exploring young adult literature, it is important to carefully construct an interpretation which can build open-mindedness about identities and differences rather than creating narrow, categorical identity definitions like some which have already been developed. For teachers to promote the idea of the collective identity in their classroom, they themselves must be willing to devote the time to understanding and analyzing multicultural young adult literature in great depth, and must build strategies which promote the literature's complexity rather than oversimplifying its messages.



Young adult literature has been marginalized or devalued in the past. As these works continue to gain recognition and notoriety, it is evident that young adults can benefit greatly from interpretation and analysis of young adult literature. Many of the questions raised by young adult novels such as those by Matt de la Peña and Sherman Alexie are complex and multi-layered. These novels can spark discussion which will encourage students to think critically about their own identities and their own perspectives on the world. Because high school students are in the midst of their identity development, the characters they read about will influence their sense of self, ability to fit in, and social understanding of their world's composition. While controversial topics prevalent in young adult literature have often been ignored, texts with such topics can appeal to young adults' interests and also work to further their process of identity development. These topics can build open-mindedness as well as definitive opinions on values, morality, and identity. Multicultural young adult literature with controversial themes can foster social consciousness in order to allow young adults to recognize commonalities, overlook differences, and promote tolerance, creating an awareness of the global world and establishing an identity within that larger context.

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