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## Teaching Issues of Identity Through Multicultural Young Adult Literature

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*Utah State University*

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TEACHING ISSUES OF IDENTITY THROUGH MULTICULTURAL  
YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

by

Emily M. Withers

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

English

Approved:

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Steven Shively, Ph.D.  
Major Professor

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John Gamber, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

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Jennifer Sinor, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY  
Logan, Utah

2019

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## ABSTRACT

## Teaching Identity Through Young Adult Literature

by

Emily M. Withers, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2019

Major Professor: Dr. Steven Shively  
Department: English

This thesis is a three-part paper advocating for teaching identity in a high school English class using a blend of classic literature and contemporary multicultural young adult literature. The first section focuses on personal experiences and research illustrating the need for more multicultural literature in English curriculum. Teaching novels that focus on situations not relevant to adolescents or their culture leads to feelings of marginalization and a disinterest in literature in general. Obstacles keep a more progressive teaching approach from happening, but teachers can overcome the obstacles by focusing on student needs. The second section of the thesis outlines a sample unit on identity using an older novel, *The Great Gatsby*, with the newer multicultural young adult novel, *American Street*. It makes connections between a search for one's identity as it relates to culture, race, and the American dream. The unit analyzes the literature and gives ideas for questions and activities to enrich discussion of the novels. The third section of the thesis lists other exemplary contemporary young adult multicultural texts teachers will find useful as they seek additional opportunities to diversify their curriculum. Each novel includes a summary as well as a brief analysis of how the novel connects to identity and how it can be included in curricula.

(40 pages)

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

## Teaching Identity Through Young Adult Literature

Emily M. Withers

Despite changing demographics of high school classrooms, teaching practices and literature remain similar to decades-old practices focusing more on literary devices and symbolism than on topics relevant to the students. Many teachers don't have the time to find new novels. And when they do find the texts, they are often at a loss for how to properly teach the novels. This thesis is a three-part paper advocating for teaching identity to high school students using a blend of classic literature and contemporary multicultural young adult literature. The first section focuses on personal experiences and research illustrating the need for more multicultural literature in English curriculum. Teenagers need to explore their own identities, but novels that focus on situations not relevant to their situation or culture leads to feelings of marginalization and a disinterest in literature in general. Certain obstacles keep a more progressive teaching approach from happening, but teachers can overcome the obstacles by focusing on student needs.

The second section of the thesis outlines an example unit teaching identity using an older novel, *The Great Gatsby*, with the newer multicultural young adult novel, *American Street*. It makes connections between a search for one's identity as it relates to race and the American dream. The unit gives ideas for questions and activities to enrich discussion of the novels.

Section three of the thesis lists other exemplary contemporary young adult multicultural texts teachers will find useful as they seek additional opportunities to diversify their curriculum. Each novel includes a summary as well as a brief analysis of how the novel connects to identity and culture.

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## INTRODUCTION

Growing up in Idaho, many of my friends and I lived in neighborhoods with little to no diversity, so school literature was one of our few exposures to other cultures; unfortunately, we never got further than *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Our knowledge of other cultures was sorely lacking both in our lives and in the literature we studied. It wasn't until my senior year of high school when Mrs. Troyer, an innovative English teacher, had us read *The Kite Runner* that I experienced the thrill of stepping outside my own small-town, white, middle-class paradigm to see through the eyes of someone so different from me. I was riveted as I read about Amir and his early years in Afghanistan and his heartbreaking journey. War in Afghanistan was a hot topic at the time, but I learned a different side to the story I never would have heard from the news. The novel showed a sympathetic view the people of Afghanistan at a time when they were often portrayed as terrorists in the media. After I read *The Kite Runner*, I had a better idea of the struggle Afghani-Americans might have as a part of the larger American culture, a culture that saw theirs as a threat. For perhaps the first time, I had some understanding and empathy for a culture outside of my small town.

Until I started my student teaching at Silverado High School, a school in south Las Vegas with almost 2,500 students, I was never exposed to diverse cultures working together in one classroom. Unfortunately, the literature of this English class was similar to the canonical literature of my own high school experience, literature filled with white male protagonists: a problem I never considered until working with a more diversified classroom. A lack of literature by authors of color contributes to non-white students feeling that white Western culture is the only culture worth writing or reading about. In her article, "Multicultural Literature and Young Adolescents: A Kaleidoscope of Opportunity," Susan M. Landt argues that when students are not exposed to literature

about their own culture, it “can activate feelings of marginalization and cause students to question their place within society” (694).<sup>1</sup>

During my student teaching, I experienced the potential impact of multicultural texts in a classroom. I taught students from all over the world, from Korea, the Philippines, and Mexico. One of my students, a Hispanic girl, never participated in class. She talked to her friends but would never engage with the lessons. I saw her excitement about reading for the first time when we read *Crazy, Loco*, a collection of short stories by Mexican-American author David Rice. Suddenly, she was speaking up during the stories to interpret words for the class or to express how accurate the story was and how similar to her own experience. For perhaps the first time ever, she identified with the characters in a story. Previously, her culture had been pushed to the margins in our English class, but reading stories about her own culture validated her life experiences and her own identity as a member of a Hispanic community. She was excited that a book finally related to her life and showed her that white Western culture was not the only culture worth writing about. This was one isolated incident, but it made me wonder where the novels were for the rest of my diverse students. Furthermore, I began to suspect that my white students learned more when diverse students actively participated in the class.

Minority students can feel out of place in a school whose culture may differ vastly from their own. In high school, I had a friend who was one of only a few African American students. I didn't think about her skin color because I was used to seeing her every day. Later, I learned that she often felt out of place in public. She was acutely aware that people watched her more closely than the white people around her. Especially at the mall, she was watched because she was seen as a higher threat for shoplifting. She grew

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<sup>1</sup> I acknowledge that the limitations and problems with the term “multicultural.” Such a word creates a damaging binary between white people and then everyone who is not white. It also implies assimilation and a lack of respect for difference. However, multicultural, as a term, continues to be used in secondary education. Because this thesis is aimed at secondary teachers, I have chosen to use this term, while acknowledging its reification of white supremacy.



up in the same place I did, yet had a different experience entirely and didn't feel comfortable in her own hometown. Her awareness that people saw her dark skin before anything else pushed aside other aspects of her identity, like her hometown or her religion, until she felt like her race was the greatest signifier of her core identity.

For my purposes in this thesis, identity includes the categories of race, gender, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, religion, ability and socio-economic status. One's identity, of course, is not limited to these categories, nor are these categories finite and known. Identity is always fluid. One's sense of self comes from an intersection of forces, forces, like race, that cannot be easily extricated. Still, high school students are at a moment when their identity formation is rapidly changing; they are trying to figure out who they are in relation to the world in which they move. As I discuss further in the next section, some students, especially white students are never forced to really explore their identity because their experience of who they are is reflected and affirmed constantly. So, to help students analyze their personal identity, my thesis argues for using multicultural literature to explicitly teach identity in high school. The first section of my thesis discusses why multicultural literature is not already being utilized enough in the classroom and argues for the inclusion of more diversity. Teachers are under pressure from administration and from parents to create lesson plans quickly and to teach effectively. I examine obstacles to teaching about identity using literature by diverse authors. I also argue that part of the problem involves white privilege and the difficulties of addressing race in a classroom setting.

The second section of the thesis is a proposed unit on identity using *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald and *American Street* by Ibi Zoboi. Although the unit plan includes some activities, it is not designed with daily lesson plans, journal prompts, or quizzes. Instead, it focuses on character identity and how identity relates to white privilege and the American dream. Organizing the unit this way highlights the

importance of themes over symbols and vocabulary. Each unit section ends with a list of other potential activities for students. Within the section, I illustrate how characteristics of identity connect to the novels, pose questions about the points that can go deeper, and highlight what students should be examining more closely in the text. Even if students cannot identify specifically with the characters from the novels like Jay Gatsby or Fabiola Toussaint, they can still learn about the complexities of identity from them and others in the novels.

The third section is an annotated list of other contemporary young adult novels by authors of color that teachers can utilize as additional resources either in teaching or to include in a classroom library for students' personal reading. I chose the titles on the list so that teachers can have a workable number of novels to choose from and avoid the overwhelming search for new novels. Each novel has a character exploring their own personal identity as they try to consolidate the different facets of their identity like culture, religion, friends, etc. Because traditional texts too often focus on men, the novels on the list are exclusively female-centric, that is, written by a woman and with a female protagonist. Lastly, each novel on the list takes place in the United States to help the texts be more relatable to readers. Identity is more complicated for other nationalities; however, I am focusing on how diverse cultures work within the larger culture of the United States.

## PIECES OF IDENTITY

Including more opportunities to learn about the complexities of a person's identity through multicultural literature can benefit all students. Teenagers are working to realize who they are in relation to the world, and literature is one avenue teachers can take to guide students. Beverly Daniel Tatum illustrates the complexity of searching for personal identity with a series of questions: "The adolescent capacity for self-reflection allows one to ask, 'Who am I now?' 'Who was I before?' 'Who will I become?' The answers to these questions . . . ripple throughout the lifespan" (20). More importantly, by actively reading about new cultures, students can learn to push aside previous notions or stereotypes about these cultures and learn how to function as a diverse community. ALAN editor Bryan Gillis, in his article "Understanding and Connecting Our Ways of Being in the World," offers insights on making connections in a positive school environment. He brings out the richness of multicultural literature in how it can "engage students in the academic content" (86) as well as foster empathy within the classroom environment (87). In classroom demographics from rooms of predominantly white students to a diverse majority, everyone can benefit from learning how to talk about race in an open and respectful way. Many students who are now part of the white American culture descend from a heritage of immigration and can learn to see their own culture through a new perspective.

The experiences of both my student and my friend show the need for new cultural perspectives in identity because of white privilege. "White privilege" refers to the unearned privileges white people in Western culture enjoy because of the color of their skin. Going further, white privilege refers to the legacies of privilege that whiteness engenders. That is, white privilege entails not only the current and personal (or individual) advantages that a person's phenotypic whiteness creates. It also takes the

form of the structural and institutional advantages--and their material and social repercussions--that have benefited white populations (to the detriment of non-white populations) across generations since this nation's founding. Before graduate school, I had never considered the idea that I was privileged, and I'm still learning exactly what white privilege is and how it shapes society. But I do know that unlike my friend, I was privileged to walk around town without being closely watched, and unlike my student, I was privileged to read many stories that spoke to my own culture. Accustomed as I was to my privileged life, I never recognized that people around me were not. Cory Collins, senior writer for *Teaching Tolerance*, calls this the "power of normal" (40). White privilege is manifest in countless ways, but one way was through the books I read in high school. Most of the books being taught in school and that graced the shelves of the library had white authors and white protagonists, and that was "normal." I was privileged to read these books and never questioned my identity as a white person because most of the characters in my reading selection were white. I did not consider that relating to white Western protagonists might be a struggle for people of other cultures.

### Obstacles to Diversifying Curriculum

In my experience as a student and as a teacher, I have seen that the typical high school English class focuses on canonical literature that students don't relate to, regardless of culture and background. Students do not see themselves in the literature. A class that studies *Oedipus* cannot relate to a man who had sex with his mother. And when they read *The Scarlet Letter*, they don't understand what it was like to be a woman in Puritan New England. The problem is furthered because the books are predominantly about adult men. As a result, many students are alienated by the literature. All they learn

is a formal understanding of point-of-view, symbols, and figurative language. So, what should be done? Literature should speak to what the students care about, and one facet of what they care about is their own identity. They are changing, growing, experimenting, and finding independence as they grapple with questions like the ones Tatum identifies. Teachers can help students answer these questions. One way is to shift the way we teach classical literature, and the other is to introduce more contemporary multicultural young adult literature to include stories that are more relatable to students.

Few people would actively argue against the inclusion of more diverse literature in the classroom, so what is keeping it from happening? First, there are many factors that teachers have no control over—like state testing, scripted curricula, and censorship—all of which require time to manage. The market is flooded with young adult novels that are not well written. Teachers—between grading papers, volunteering to facilitate extracurricular activities, attempting to please parents, and juggling a home life on top of the myriad other time-consuming crises that arise day-to-day—do not have much time for wading through piles of texts to find the few that are valuable for teaching. Because teachers do not have much time, they continue teaching familiar texts in a familiar way, instead of focusing on student needs. Lisa A. Hazlett, in her article “Updating YAL Reading Lists While Retaining Quality Titles,” outlines the issue of finding new texts.

Major determiners of any novel’s use are curricula and availability, but those afforded choices likely retain those previously used. Many YAL titles continually reappear because they are available and familiar with expansive resources; many educators, especially the beginning ones, find it more convenient to use existing materials than create new ones. (158)

Teachers stick with what they already know to keep from spending too much time on lesson plans. When every new class brings a new group of students with new emotional and social struggles, a lesson plan from ten years ago isn’t going to reach students as well as a new plan. New novels and ideas are out there, but many novels, like *The Kite Runner* or *American Street*, slip through the fingers of those already juggling a full load.

Second, complacency from teachers keeps new curriculum from developing. Even something as seemingly harmless as sticking with old lesson plans stems from the idea that the teaching practices and literature already in place are good enough, despite the changing demographics of the classroom. According to the Census Bureau, by 2020, minority groups will make up more than half of the children in the United States (Chappell). The cultural needs of students will not be met by continuing to inundate class readings with literature by the popularly named “dead white guys” taught in the same old traditional contexts. For example, in reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, white readers can end the reading and give themselves a pat on the back for not being racist. The book was inspirational for its time but now serves to give white people a reason to feel good about themselves, to ignore their privilege and the work we still have left to do regarding race in the U.S. When readers focus on the African American characters, they see a different story. Jem learns a powerful lesson through his coming-of-age story, but Calpurnia and her children are still in their same situation with not much hope for betterment. And Tom Robinson ends up dead because he can’t see any other way out of his dilemma. There are more stories happening here than just the Finch’s. White privilege keeps people happy in their own reality. Much more goes untaught because teachers teach what they already know. Although *To Kill a Mockingbird* presents students with outdated and troubling concepts of race and racial politics in the US, the book does not need to be disregarded entirely. Teachers need to change their approach.

Whether a teacher’s complacency is deliberate or unconscious, teaching about identity remains shallow and ignores those aspects which are most important in a society where many cultures reside. Beverly Tatum points out a problem she noticed during a class activity: she asked her students to fill in the blank of the sentence, “I am \_\_\_\_\_,” and in their seemingly routine answers, she began to see a trend where “students of color usually mentioned their racial or ethnic group” and, in most cases, “white students rarely

mentioned being white” (21). White students, because they are a part of the hegemonic norm, don’t have to think about their race as a component of identity and take it for granted. But with some guidance, they can learn about how race shapes who a person is.

Third, progressive multicultural literature isn’t being used more in the high school curriculum because race can be an uncomfortable topic for many people. bell hooks claims people are not just wary of race, they are actually afraid to talk about it. She then notes specific fears: “And yet when this reason is interrogated it usually is shown to cover up the fear of conflict, bad feeling, or lead to counterattack” (28). How can racism, which affect people on a global scale, ever reach any sort of resolution if people are afraid to talk about it? Ignoring the problem hasn’t helped before. I have seen this fear at work in a teaching class in graduate school. A few students were willing to talk about race and racism, but most of us listened without participating for fear of saying something wrong. As we worked, though, more people were able to open up and contribute to the conversation. We learned that even if a question was asked in ignorance, it would be answered honestly and without judgment. I learned more from those conversations than all of my high school and undergraduate education. To have diverse cultures addressed in schools, many teachers will need to learn how to talk about race and the dangers of white supremacy in a rational way.

## A PROGRESSIVE APPROACH

Overcoming the obstacles that keep more contemporary multicultural literature from being taught is not the work of a day or even a year. It is not the work of one person. The inclusion of literature by diverse authors is slowly moving forward, and I have created a pedagogical approach to push the agenda forward a little more by making it easier for teachers to find and incorporate newer novels and newer lesson plans into their curricula to teach about identity. Marcelle Haddix and Detra Price-Dennis, in a study of preservice teachers, found that when teachers read more diverse texts, they “are afforded a space to challenge their own normative worldviews and respond to racist ideologies and structures” (252). Knowing the benefits of diversifying literature will help teachers overcome the obstacles named in the previous section. Teachers will help students address complicated issues surrounding race and identity as teachers update curriculum and make discussions on race and racism normal and natural. The positive challenge to racist worldviews Haddix and Price-Dennis argue for can benefit teachers in any stage of their career. And students can learn better practices for handling negativity when their teachers are setting a positive example of eradicating racism.

Students can be taught how to talk about uncomfortable and potentially inflammatory topics. To do this, teachers must establish the classroom as a safe place to speak and work without fear of harsh judgment, which might be difficult, but it is possible. Matthew R. Kay in his book *Not Light, But Fire*, argues about the ineffectiveness of simply telling students that the classroom is a safe place. He asserts, “In order to nurture hard conversations about race, we must first commit to *building* conversational safe spaces, not just *declaring* them” (16). The classroom environment must be one where students feel their opinion has value, and that they won’t be attacked for speaking. The idea of a safe space might need to be reinforced and worked at for the



entire school year, but it is necessary in order to talk about difficult topics like race. bell hooks writes, “Through the cultivation of awareness . . . we have the tools to break with the dominator model of social human engagement and the will to imagine new and different ways that people might come together” (35). In this case, one tool we have is the literature used in the classroom.

My thesis advocates for the inclusion of contemporary young adult literature from diverse perspectives, to teach identity. The unit does not shove classic literature aside in favor of new texts; rather, it utilizes a blended approach in pairing an older text with a contemporary young adult novel. *The Great Gatsby* is a classic novel F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote almost century ago, but it still has much to offer contemporary readers once teachers shift away from a traditional reading of the text. *American Street* is a 2017 novel written by an author of color. The protagonist is a Haitian immigrant searching for her place in a new country. Teaching these two novels together can bring out hook’s “cultivation of awareness” in seeing new sides to what makes up a person’s identity, specifically addressing white privilege and the American dream, and what students can do with this knowledge.

### Establishing Identity

Teaching a unit on identity is a way to focus on student needs instead of focusing on an upcoming test or traditional lesson plans. As teenagers try to figure out who they are and who they want to be, they will not find themselves by identifying metaphors and symbolism. Students can find themselves in literature, and *The Great Gatsby* and *American Street* both lend themselves heavily to the theme of identity. Identity is an enormous theme, so much so that an entire semester could be structured around the many nuances of what goes into a person’s identity as it is linked to many factors.

Because of how broad the theme is, this unit focuses on how personal and cultural identity fit within the framework of American society. Please note that when talking about the main characters, I call Gatsby by his last name and Fabiola by her first name. I do acknowledge the biases between genders and ages of the two characters and also the time in which the novels were written. But I refer to them this way because this is how the author chose to reference the characters within their respective novels.

Earlier in my thesis, I introduced Beverly Tatum's classroom activity in having students fill in the blank of "I am \_\_\_\_." I bring this up again for two reasons: first, because it is a good activity to introduce students to the theme of identity. Second, her findings that white people did not identify their whiteness shows that different groups of people perceive their identities differently. As Robin DiAngelo points out in her book *White Fragility*, individualism "reinforces the concept that each of us is a unique individual and that our group memberships, such as race, class, or gender, are irrelevant to our opportunities" (10). We are too busy pretending that everyone is equal that we don't bother seeing what it means to be a part of a specific group. I am not saying that focusing on the individual is bad. Teachers need to focus on the individual needs of the students to teach effectively. I am saying that teachers should not forget or disregard group membership as a facet of identity. Through literature, students can be exposed to cultures other than their own to see how different groups work with or without privilege in the United States. They can see examples of how these "group memberships" are important parts of a person's identity.

So, what does identity have to do with *The Great Gatsby* and *American Street*? Everything. Jay Gatsby is obsessed with forming his identity to become the person he believes Daisy wants or needs. Fitzgerald was critiquing the American dream, but what were his views and how can they be problematic? He was, of course, viewing the American dream from his own privileged life as a white middle-class man. All the main

characters in the book are white, but all the people, the two who end up dead were, at least originally, from a working class. Myrtle and Gatsby tried to change who they were and rise above their class, and they are killed for it. James Gatz transformed himself into Jay Gatsby in an attempt to base his identity on wealth and on sophisticated people in his life. Only at the end of the novel do we find out he still has family, including his father, living in Minnesota. Even then very little is said on his upbringing, because his upbringing didn't necessarily have any bearing on who he was at the end.

Gatsby gives up his family, but Fabiola from *American Street* works to bring her family together. Many students come from racially mixed or blended families, or they may have moved from a place where they felt they belonged to a place they felt like a stranger. Whatever a student's background, they can learn about the fluid definitions of home and family from examining both Gatsby and Fabiola and their differing ideas on the need for family to create identity. Chantal, Fabiola's cousin, expresses this fluidity when she says, "Home? No, I'm not. I wasn't born here. Haiti is home" (114), and later, "My mother is home. My sisters are home" (117). Unlike Gatsby, Chantal is basing her identity on her birthplace and her family. Her sisters have embraced their life in Detroit and consider it home—seeing where they live as a more important determiner of who they are. Through these examples, students can see that there are many ways to define oneself and more than one way to define home and family. There might be as many definitions as there are students in the room.

Both Gatsby and Fabiola discover the complications and dangers of changing their identity. People end up dead either directly or indirectly from their actions. Students can look at how the characters change over the course of the novel and see if characters' actions conform to their original identity or if their actions change as their identity shifts. For example, do Fabiola's actions at the end of the novel fit with her character at the beginning of the novel? Has she allowed the people around her to

change her? Fitzgerald may be saying that the American dream is a farce, but trying to achieve goals is not necessarily what brings about a character's downfall. Perhaps the real issue comes from denying their real identity. Nick Carraway realizes the disconnect between who they are and who they want to be at the end of the novel when he is thinking about his "Middle West." He comes to the conclusion that "this has been a story of the West, after all – Tom and Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan and I, were all Westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life" (176). In trying to change who they were as Westerners, they created a tragedy. Reading the novels in this way—implying that creating your own identity is dangerous—is problematic and not necessarily true. But it can lead to discussions on whether or not creating your identity is worth any risks, which I address further in the next section.

Besides asking leading questions, creative teachers will include meaningful activities to help their students connect the ideas of identity from the novels to their own lives. For activities to spark further exploration, students can:

1. Map out a character's identity with a diagram or by drawing the character and labeling what s/he sees, hears, thinks, does, etc.
2. Compare/contrast Fabiola and Gatsby, especially regarding their goals and motives for their actions.
3. Make a comparison chart between a character and the student.
4. Write "I Am," "I Was," and "I Hope To Be" poems.
5. Rewrite a scene from the novel(s) with the student as the main character.
6. Debate where Gatsby or Fabiola could have acted differently for a happier outcome to the novel.
7. Keep an "Identity Journal" to record thoughts during the unit.

## Race, Ethnicity, Power, and Identity

Gatsby is born into a privileged structure that allows for a kind of class mobility for white people but not for anyone else. Fabiola in *American Street* has to actively engage with her race as she tries to find her place in society. Fabiola's race and culture can be studied for issues of color-blind racial attitudes, since ignoring them would erase essential parts of her character. It is true that people should not be judged based on skin color, but students need to recognize the different cultures of people in the United States. Saying everyone is equal is not synonymous with saying everyone is the same, which is what Robin DiAngelo warns against with the concept of individualism. *American Street* is a part of the #ownvoices movement, a movement which seeks to recommend literature written by people using their own cultural voice to express their identities and who they are. Ibi Zoboi is expressing her love of her Haitian heritage through Fabiola. Students from marginalized cultures can be empowered by seeing themselves represented in the literature. One reason Fabiola is such a compelling character is because of the culture she brings with her from Haiti. She has a different belief system that she doesn't let go of even though her cousins don't identify with her ideas of Papa Legba and other gods. Fabiola stays true and asserts to her cousins, "He is Papa Legba and he is opening doors and big, big gates. I will show you. I promise" (166). Ignoring beliefs and other aspects of Fabiola would be ignoring essential parts of her character. Her religious beliefs are as much a part of who she is as her gender and age. Looking at these qualities makes her reasoning clear as she repeatedly puts herself in dangerous situations like talking to Bad Leg out on the street at night. With these discussions, students can also learn about white privilege.

White privilege is a difficult topic because many white people will push against the idea that they are privileged and may even feel attacked. Robin DiAngelo calls this

defensiveness “white fragility.” She says, “Within their insulated environment of racial privilege, whites both expect racial comfort and become less tolerant of racial stress” (100). Learning often requires hard work and discomfort, and learning about white privilege will not be any different. Kazi L. Hossain, associate professor of education at Millersville University, taught the concept of white privilege to a college class. In the end, only a few students accepted that white privilege even existed, though he discovered that even the group that was against white privilege only challenged five of the items on Peggy McIntosh’s iconic list in her essay “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.” Hossain argues, “The lack of reactions or comments about the remaining 21 items from the list indicate that, deep inside, these students acknowledge them to be true” (55). Teaching explicitly about white privilege in a high school classroom would create even more challenges than Hossain found with his college students. These challenges would be compounded by the high school students not being mature enough or from potential backlash from parents who push against liberal topics being taught in the classroom. This is especially true and problematic in small towns where the teacher might be teaching the children of the school and district administrators. However, Hossain’s experience could have been different if students had begun learning about white privilege earlier in their education. And even if white privilege itself isn’t taught, high school teachers can lay the foundation of the concept through the use of multicultural literature and discussions on topics like race and racial color-blindness.

In this particular unit, discussions of race and culture shouldn’t stay exclusively with *American Street*. Key parts of Gatsby’s identity are due to his privileges as a white man, yet teachers rarely talk about race or ethnicity when teaching *The Great Gatsby*. Let’s shift it. James Gatz takes charge of his own identity to become Jay Gatsby. In asking students a question like, “If you could change your identity, what would it be?” many would probably say something similar to what Gatsby accomplished: piles of

money, big house, getting the girl/boy of their dreams. But he would not have had these opportunities if he were not white. He even hides an important part of himself—the fact that he is Jewish—in order to reach his dream. At the time, being Jewish would have impaired his privileges, so he casts it aside with his family and his own name.

The term “Jewish” is complex in that it can refer to someone’s religion, nationhood, ethnicity, or all three. Whichever definition applies to a person, their Jewish identity may form a large part of their person identity. However, Gatsby, in order to achieve his dream, changes his identity of the Jewish boy James Gatz from the Midwest to Jay Gatsby, the mysterious millionaire on Long Island. Similarly—though not from a Jewish family—Fabiola allows herself to be renamed “Fabulous” and works hard to live up to that name so she can fit in (98). One way to make the name changes even more relevant to students is to pull up a list of the current celebrities who changed their names and how their identity changed. For example, Erich Weisz changed his name to Harry Houdini and Natalie Herschlag became Natalie Portman. These are two examples of people who changed their Jewish names to something different, but there are many more examples of people who change their names when they begin acting. What sorts of privileges come with changing to non-Jewish identity? Students can study these examples and ask questions. Like Gatsby, did any of them change their name in an attempt to remake themselves? Why did they change their name? Did they actively change themselves, or, like Fabiola, did they let others shape their identity? Do any students dislike their given name or family name for any reason? Would they change it? Students can see if they are actively creating their identity, trying to push off parts of their identity, or letting others dictate what their identity is. Teachers can even bring up “passing,” which is when a person from one racial group is accepted as a part of a different racial group. How are Gatsby and Fabiola passing?

An issue similar to white privilege is class. Both are about who has power and whether or not that power is actually earned. Using both *The Great Gatsby* and *American Street*, students can see two examples of power dynamics in play (explored more in the following paragraphs) and apply these examples to widen their perspective on their own identity and social experience. Students can start small in looking at themselves and the school. Who in the school is seen as lesser or other? Are certain groups seen as elite? Who does the seeing? What does being a part of a certain group say about a person's identity? What privileges comes from being in certain groups? Next, students can look at the country and think of it in terms of biases between groups. If two people are applying for a job, one person with an English accent and one with a Southern accent, who do you think will be hired? Why are certain areas and accents associated with lesser or greater intelligence? Examine how people are portrayed in Hollywood and how these stereotypes (which can apply to race and gender as well as class and accent) can hurt groups of people and thus undermine the whole nation as "Equality for all" becomes an empty phrase.

Privilege and class are a large part of what happens in *The Great Gatsby*. Gatsby tries to change his class by accumulating wealth, owning a big house, and throwing lavish parties. Many rumors fly about where he came from, but people generally accept him as an eccentric man of wealth and happily make use of his resources. However, Tom Buchanan makes it clear that Gatsby is still not a part of the upper class because of the unsavory way Gatsby acquired the money. Tom exhibits a double-standard as he is having an affair with the working-class Myrtle, but dating whomever he wants is also a part of his privilege. Students can see throughout the novel how class is an arbitrary distinction based on who has the power to say what is correct or not. The upper class did not earn their place in society or even their wealth, just as white people did not earn the privileges that come with their skin color.



Class lines and biases can be found in *American Street* as well, and Fabiola's experience as a high school student will be more relatable than someone living in a mansion. Fabiola's cousins had a difficult time making a place for themselves in Detroit because they had Hattian accents. But Chantal, Pri, and Donna built a place for themselves by being smarter and physically stronger than everyone else. They were able to overcome the biases of their peers to create their own identities as the "Three Bees" instead of being disregarded just because they were immigrants. In this way, Fabiola's cousins also pave the way for her to enter school at a higher social class than she would have otherwise, but this also means that she has her own set of expectations from others that she needs to overcome in order to have her own identity and be accepted for who she is instead of who she is related to. Society puts constraints on her identity as she realizes the power of an accent and strives to speak like an American because, as she says, "Any hint of an accent could be an invitation for judgement" (60). As students see what Fabiola and her cousins do to be accepted, they can look at themselves and see what they have to do to be accepted. Does this acceptance come at a price? Is it worth being yourself if it means being judged by peers? Are we patently willing to buy into assimilative capitalist hegemony to benefit ourselves at the expense of our communities? These questions could also lead to introspection on how accepting students are of others and their identities.

Students may need some guidance to make discussions of race and ethnicity applicable to them. Activities for students to learn about race and class include:

1. Reading the nonfiction essays "Take the Tortillas Out of Your Poetry" by Rudolfo A. Anaya or "Should Writers Use They Own English?" by Vershawn Ashanti Young.
2. Drawing a diagram of their own school and what groups are in it.

3. Placing characters of the book on a social class/privilege scale and saying why they are at a certain place on the scale. Students can use whatever value they want (wealth, kindness, popularity, etc.).

### American Dream and Identity

According to the American dream, anyone can achieve their goals and dreams in the United States if they work hard enough. *The Great Gatsby* is often the novel chosen to teach the American dream, but it gives a closed view of what and who are involved with creating the American dream. F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote the novel to show that the American dream is tainted as people focus on materialism and social class. Shifting from the more traditional approach of looking at the theme of the American dream through the symbols in the novel can make the American dream more meaningful and more positive. Instead of looking at the American dream as solely a negative ideal, students should see the American dream as more nuanced or as a paradox, as John Steinbeck points out in his essay “Paradox and Dream.” He argues that the American dream is a paradox because of people’s habits like building homes yet never staying in them for long, or in looking at how we strive for independence yet simultaneously fight for aid from the government. In the novel, the American dream is achieved with money, a big house, a nice car, and finding the person of your dreams. But is that what everyone wants? Who is included in the term “everyone”? *The Great Gatsby* only showcases rich white people trying to obtain their dreams, but they were not the only people with dreams in the 1920’s. Lesson plans should be changed to teach the American dream in a more progressive way.

English teachers can consider teaming up with a history teacher to help students better understand the people and situations surrounding the historical aspects of the

American dream. Infamously, “history is written by the victors.” And that is why students should be prompted to dig a little deeper into the topic to see a clearer picture of what life was like for most people at the time. One way to do this is by teaching through primary texts instead of relying on a biased history book. Such a unit, in looking specifically at the 1920s, might include reading primary documents written by people of different races and classes. There could also be a section on poetry focusing on poetry written about New York to give students an idea of what the time was like through the eyes of people who were there. Students can be taught meter, rhyme, and figurative language; but they can also be taught to look beyond the words and see the pictures being painted of the world. Let them see a city through the eyes of Claude McKay in “The Tropics of New York,” or focus on a weary working-class man in “The Weary Blues,” by Langston Hughes. Students can even see how some aspects of New York never change from Evelyn Scott’s “Autumn Dusk in Central Park.”

There are many ways to teach the American dream to make it more personal and progressive than it is traditionally taught. For example, instead of giving the students a standard definition of the American Dream, teachers can ask students to define it themselves. The term itself is fairly self-explanatory, so students will probably have an idea of its meaning and what it looks like from the start. The next step is to expand the definition. The class could take a metacognitive look at their definitions to see why they think that is the American dream. Have they seen someone achieve that specific dream? Teachers can even ask for synonyms of the term, like someone has “made it” or even as simple as they’ve got their “crap together.” How does this apply to identity? Someone might identify themselves based on possessions. What defines a person more: what they have or what they want?

All of these examples can lead students to look beyond the stereotypical ideal of the American Dream of a house with a white picket fence. Celebrities have money, but

can the American Dream be simpler than that? Gatsby believes that he needs a mansion and large amounts of money to achieve the dream, but in *American Street*, Fabiola's main goal is simply to have her mother with her. After struggling with death and guilt, Fabiola's ending is hopeful; instead of having a specific dream, she appreciates being in a place where she can have dreams. As she travels to her mother, she thinks, "Unlike in Haiti, which means 'land of many mountains,' the ground is level here and stretches as far as I can see—as if there are no limits to dreams here" (324). To her, dreaming is an important aspect of what it means to be American. Students can put themselves in the position of Fabiola and think what they would do and what their goals would be. If the goal is still money, what is that money going towards? Maybe the goal is to leave a tough neighborhood in Detroit. But maybe the goal is to give back to the neighborhood somehow to improve the lives of everyone there.

Students can also find their own way of living the American dream. What is the point of looking at symbols and themes in literature if people are not applying them to their own lives? Students should be able to experience the American dream first hand instead of just reading about it. The upper-level high school students this unit targets face big decisions about the rest of their lives. Students can think of their dream and make a five-year plan. They can find someone living their perception of the dream and interview that person on how they got there or even shadow someone in the student's chosen profession. If their dream is to help their neighborhood, they can come up with a plan to improve the community.

Projects like this can also serve to highlight the obstacles people face when working for their dreams. On the cover of *American Street*, the book summary includes the question, "Will [Fabiola] pay the price for the American dream?" Immigration laws stand directly in her way, but she ends up paying a huge price when she betrays Dray, and her boyfriend ends up getting shot by the police. Gatsby needs money to reach his

dream. Even after gaining wealth and a huge house, he faces obstacles, and he never achieves his dream of marrying Daisy. If people have to break the law to achieve their goals, what does that say about America? Students should consider their own goals and what their dreams are worth. What would they do if achieving their dream required breaking the law?

I have already included many activities to help teach students a modernized view the American dream. For more opportunities to learn about the American dream, students can:

1. Research immigration policies and current events.
2. Look back into their own family history to see when and why their family ended up where they are.
3. Creating a playlist of songs that embody the American dream.

## ADDITIONAL CONTEMPORARY MULTICULTURAL NOVELS

Teachers face a daunting task in discovering new multicultural works for their students to read and relate to in their search for identity. Previously in my thesis, I concentrated on the “why” and “how” of teaching these novels. I created a potential plan using *The Great Gatsby* and *American Street*, but there are many other possible books. When thinking of a blended approach to teaching literature, teachers may find that some contemporary novels pair better with *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth* or a Shakespeare play than with *The Great Gatsby*. This section is a list of works a creative teacher can turn to in their search for classroom literature to guide students in exploring identity.

Ahmed, Samira. *Love, Hate & Other Filters*. SOHO Teen, 2018.

For the first half of the novel, Maya Aziz’s story revolves around a romantic-comedy type of storyline. Maya is trying to walk a fine line between her Muslim beliefs and living in modern U.S.A. Her parents set her up with a Muslim boy named Kareem, but she likes Phil who doesn’t share her beliefs. Amidst this teen drama, every chapter has a brief interlude talking about a character who doesn’t show up until later in the book as a suicide bomber. After the man blows up a building, Muslims are immediately blamed. At school, bullies target Maya because she is Muslim and is even physically assaulted on a school trip. Later, the bomber is revealed to have been a white supremacist. As for Maya’s story, she has to cut ties with her parents to achieve her dream of going to a college in New York. The ending feels positive yet realistic as she is away at school and not much is resolved about her boy troubles.

*Love, Hate & Other Filters* is a great novel to address the implicit stereotypes that people have and may not even know. Samira Ahmed purposely explores these biases. She

uses the chapter interludes to manipulate the reader's assumptions that the bomber is a Muslim, since there is nothing said about him physically, and his actions don't have much detail or context. Readers can realize they carry the same assumptions as the people in the novel.

Ali, S. K. *Saints and Misfits*. Salaam Reads, 2017.

Like Maya in *Love, Hate & Other Filters*, Janna, the protagonist of this novel, is Muslim and falls for a boy who is not Muslim but shows respect for and an understanding of her culture. However, Janna is different from many of the other girls on this list in that she holds fast to her religion as a large part of her identity instead of pushing against it. The story begins with Janna swimming in an awkwardly large swimming suit, and her father accusing her of wearing a hijab just to please her mother. But she's not doing it for her mother; Janna is trying hard to be a good Muslim. The main struggle she faces comes in the form of Farooq, the "golden boy" from the mosque who can do no wrong in anyone's eyes. No one knows that he tried to rape Janna and continues to stalk her. In the end, Farooq is never brought to true justice, but Janna finally stands up to him and is released from the heavy cloud hanging over her. She can finally have confidence in being herself out in public.

Ali's writing is engaging as sometimes the narrator writes using emojis to help express herself and, despite the heavy topics being explored, there are still funny moments to bring the mood up momentarily. The story and the characters feel real. Janna is a teen-aged girl with many of the same interests and conflicts as her peers. It's a sad that any human would need to be humanized, but in a country that holds many prejudices against Muslims, it might be necessary. The many sides to Janna's character show that someone from a marginalized culture might have a few extra angles to her

personality that need figuring out for her to feel comfortable as herself, especially around other people.

Andreu, Maria E. *The Secret Side of Empty*. Running Press Teens, 2014.

The protagonist Monserrat Thalia, M.T. for short, is juggling multiple issues: her family's low-income as well as physical and emotional abuse from her father, to name a couple. These two problems can be traced back to her family's status as undocumented immigrants, which is the main conflict of the novel. M.T. feels trapped because she can't see how she can do normal teenager activities like getting a driver's license or going on the school trip to England. She's afraid they'll be found out and sent back to Argentina. To keep up the face of being an American citizen, she deliberately shapes her identity by refusing to speak Spanish and going by M.T. to avoid having to correct people's pronunciation of her full name. Unfortunately, this also leads to her trying to shape her little brother as well. She calls him Joey instead of Jose, even though he doesn't like the nickname. In the end, M.T. calls the police on her father after he threatens to kill her. She goes to live with her friend Chelsea and is accepted into a college.

This novel might require a trigger warning as M.T. story confronts heavy topics like abuse and suicidal thoughts. These struggles shape who she is, and a student-centered approach to the novel can teach these issues in such a way that students who are suffering similar trauma know that these issues do not define them, and that help is available. If important topics are avoided, students might not know how to manage them in their own lives.

Chao, Gloria. *American Panda*. Simon Pulse, 2018.

The main conflict of this novel is Mei's relationship with her parents. They are Taiwanese-American, and what they want for their daughter is at odds with what she



wants for herself. They want her to be a doctor, but she has germaphobia and finds more enjoyment dancing than learning about medicine. Mei is torn because she is “straddling two cultures” as she wants to live her own life but feels too guilty to change after her brother was disowned for deciding to marry a woman who can’t have children. Also, her parents want her to marry a proper Taiwanese boy, but she has fallen for a boy of Japanese descent. Her parents eventually find out about her boyfriend and her dancing and disown her as well. Mei changes her major and plans to own a dance studio, and she is dating Darren, the Japanese man. The end is bitter-sweet because her mother comes to accept her choices, and their relationship is better, but her father still rejects her.

*American Panda* is a little lighter than some of the other novels as it contains some elements of humor, mostly involving normal college worries. Even though the novel isn’t particularly deep, it offers a beautiful depiction of Taiwanese-American culture. It is a good novel for teachers to keep on a classroom shelf to recommend to students who might be struggling with identity and deciding what to do with their futures.

Menon, Sandhya. *When Dimple Met Rishi*. Simon Pulse, 2017.

Like Mei in *American Panda*, Dimple knows what she wants from life. However, her goals puts her at odds with her parents. Her mom especially only wants her to marry an Indian man. Dimple is an appealing character because she wants to be a web developer, a field more women are entering but where men still dominate. To reach her dream, she wants to go to Insomnia Con, a convention for web developers. Her parents let her go, but she later finds out that they sent her to meet Rishi. Rishi’s character faces greater challenges to his identity. He strives to be the perfect son and do what his parents want, even at the expense of his artistic career. The two meet and eventually fall in love,

but Dimple still has to learn that in life she doesn't have to sacrifice relationships for to have a career. She can keep her cultural traditions while working in American society.

White privilege isn't addressed specifically in the novel, but there are several discussions involving the idea of "other." Rishi talks about how he enjoys being different and being able to explain his culture to other people. He even talks about microaggression. Dimple, on the other hand, tries harder to fit in. Even when going back to India she felt out of place as an American. Each character has a different way of defining their identity.

Sanchez, Erika L. *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*. Knopf, 2017.

The book begins with the line, "What's surprised me most about seeing my sister dead is the lingering smirk on her face." This beginning sets the dark tone for much of the rest of the novel. The main plot revolves around Julia Reyes as she tries to discover her sister Olga's secrets. Julia sneaks into Olga's room and finds fancy lingerie, a sticky note that says "I love you," and a hotel key card. But as far as anyone knows, Olga wasn't seeing anyone. And she couldn't have any dark secrets because she is the perfect Mexican daughter that Julia can't measure up to. Julia can't even make proper tortillas. While she is looking for clues about Olga, Julia has other things going on in her life, like trying not to fight with her extended family, finding a boyfriend, and fighting depression. There are very few happy moments in Julia's life, and, at one point, she tries to commit suicide and is put into therapy. Her parents send her to Mexico, where she learns more about her family and why her parents are so protective. By staying with her extended family, she understands her own identity as a Mexican-American a little better. The novel ends more positively as she gets accepted into college.

This novel can teach that even if someone is born into a specific group, they may not feel a part of the group if they do not match what is "normal" for the group. Julia

does not feel like she fits Mexican culture or even within her own family. What can a person do in this situation? What have students seen other people do when their personal identity does not match their situation?

Watson, Renée. *This Side of Home*. Bloomsbury, 2015.

Like Janna in *Saints and Misfits*, Maya is trying to hold onto her culture. Her neighborhood used to be full of African American people, but now it is going through gentrification. Maya doesn't mind new shops in the neighborhood, but she's not happy that the majority are white-owned since Black people have a harder time getting loans and permits. The issue is especially personal to Maya when her best friend, Essence, has to move because the landlord is selling their house. Maya is confronted with problems at school as well from Principal Green when he decides to have a diversity assembly instead of the school's traditional Black History Month celebration. What follows is a battle with posters as students put up posters for the diversity assembly while others put up posters promoting Black History Month. Posters are sabotaged, and when the situation escalates, white students are never the ones who get in trouble, and Maya gets suspended. On top of this, she's dating a white boy whose father is overtly racist.

*This Side of Home* brings up the problem with using a blanket "diversity" to erase one culture. Maya tries to argue that Black History Month is everyone's history, but the principal still has a diversity assembly instead of celebrating Black cultures. Students reading this novel can discuss the problematic issue of erasing a culture and the ways that gentrification does exactly that. Identity is also brought up as Maya goes through many changes at home and in her neighborhood that she perceives as an attack on her identity, and she also has to accept that her twin sister has a right to define herself away from her sister.

Wurth, Erika T. *Crazy Horse's Girlfriend*. Curbside Splendor, 2014.

Erika T. Wurth doesn't avoid harsh topics in her novel. The story begins with Margaritte, who is part Apache, Chickasaw, and Cherokee, selling weed and getting stabbed. Even though the main plot of the novel is Margaritte and her relationship with a boy named Mike, the story is largely character driven and centers around what different people have to go through because of their identity. We see into the lives of other characters like Mike, who has a cocaine addiction; Jake, who is arrested for selling weed; Megan, who is raising a baby alone; and Will, a friend of Margaritte's who struggles within the community because he is not always accepted for being gay. Margaritte becomes pregnant and has to decide if she wants to keep the baby, and whether or not she should stay with Mike. Margaritte also has an abusive father and mother. The ending of the novel gives a hopeful glimpse into Margaritte's future. The baby is six months old and they are living with Margaritte's friend Megan. Both women are planning on going to school and striving to prove that having a baby doesn't mean they have to be trapped in the town like so many other women before them.

Margaritte and other characters go through major developments within the novel as they strive to define who they want to be outside of the identity society forces them into. Useful discussions can occur with students about white privilege, especially between Margaritte and Mike. Though he's not white, he was adopted by white parents and has everything given to him which he takes for granted. She works hard (and to no avail) not to get caught in the cycle of pregnancy that keeps many women stuck in the village.

## CONCLUSION

As teachers shift literature focus to meet the needs of their students, students will be able to go to leave high school with a better understanding of their personal identity and greater empathy for other people's cultures and identities. Concentrating more on novels that are relevant to teenagers doesn't mean throwing out older novels entirely in favor of contemporary young adult literature; it means teaching practices and lesson plans need to shift as well. New literature and one re-designed unit will not fix all problems with identity and white privilege, but these are a step in the right direction that will help make a greater impact as more teachers work to make literature more accessible to their diverse students.

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