

**THE VALUE OF USING BIRACIAL YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE IN THE
SECONDARY CLASSROOM**

by

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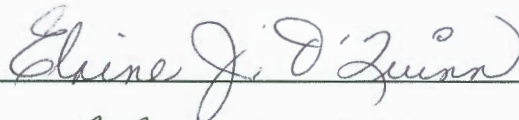
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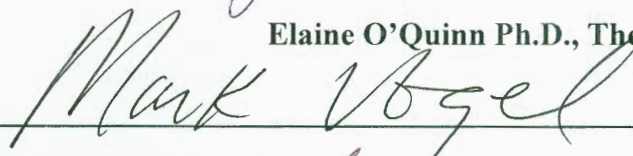
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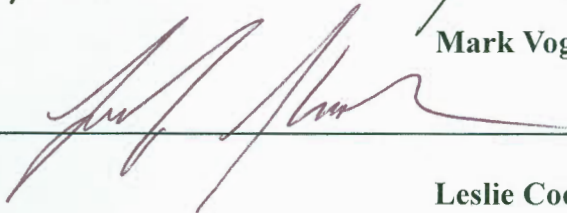
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Abstract

This thesis argues for the inclusion of biracial young adult literature in the secondary classroom because of the value it can add to students', teachers', and communities' lives. As the population of biracial young adults grows, as does the need for them to see themselves in the classroom for the development of their identity. By including biracial young adult literature in the secondary classroom, it provides a tremendous learning experience for students who are biracial and non-biracial. For students who are biracial, it allows them to connect with another who faces similar problems to themselves. For non-biracial students, these novels provide them the opportunity to learn about the issues their classmates may face and also provides a platform for these issues to be discussed. For teachers, it provides the opportunity to teach about issues of social justice, bullying, and advocating for others. By examining multiple biracial young adult novels and the issues discussed within, this thesis defends and asserts the value of using these novels in the classroom.

Acknowledgements and Dedications

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I dedicate this to my parents, Chad and Laura, for always believing in me and cheering me on. I also dedicate this to Wyatt for being my rock, my best friend, and my sanity.

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Introduction to Biracial Literature in the Classroom

There is a hidden population of students that fill the classrooms across America, students who identify as two or more races who, for the purposes of this paper, will be called biracial. The biracial population has boomed over the successive decades. According to Pew Research Center, 2015: “In 1970, among babies living with two parents, only 1% had parents who were different races from each other. By 2013, that share had risen to 10%. Today, nearly half (46%) of all multiracial Americans are younger than 18” (Pew Research Center). These students make up a considerable portion of the population, and their demographic is only expected to grow over the coming years.

Considering the growth of America’s biracial population, it is safe to say that the effects of this increase have not adequately carried over to most high school English classrooms, especially in regards to the literature used to educate students and that is available in the classroom. The problem is not only local, but also systemic. According to Sandra Hughes-Hassell, “In 2011, the CCBC [Cooperative Children’s Book Center] received approximately 3,400 books; of those, only 8.8 percent were multicultural” (213). The breakdown of this 8.8 percent is as follows: 123 African or African American, 28 Native American, 91 Asian, and 58 Latino works of literature (Hughes-Hassell 213). With Caucasian populations having fallen from fifty-nine percent of total population in 2003 to fifty percent in 2013, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2010), and the population of biracial students rapidly rising, a change is necessary in the literature to which students are exposed.

Despite the changing demographic, some might still question why it is necessary to read

works that feature biracial protagonists or issues. In Hinton and Berry's 2005 research where an African American student was reading *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* by Mildred Taylor the student responded: "It was a pivotal moment for me. For the first time in my life, I realized that I was not alone in the world. There were other black girls having experiences similar to mine, and some had grown up and written them down" (Hughes-Hassell 214). As seen through this example, the inclusion of young adult literature that shows our students in the classroom is highly important for their self esteem. Likewise, the inclusion of biracial literature in literature classes can allow students to see themselves in an active role that they may have never before considered. Biracial students may feel a connection tying them to someone else in the world when they are introduced to literature that features them as major protagonists and not just as secondary characters. This literature allows their feelings and experiences to be validated in a way that books solely featuring white protagonists about non-racial issues cannot.

Again, some may question why biracial students cannot just insert themselves as readers into novels with white protagonists. I would suggest that if a student has never seen a person in a book who looks like them, who is from the same culture, or who faces similar problems and struggles, it can be impossible to envision oneself in a similar, positive protagonist role. For many students of color, the way their race is portrayed in various forms of media, including books, can be extremely harmful, allowing others to only see what are too often negative stereotypes which can lead to biracial students believing that the mainstream narrative about who they are is the only one to be considered.

The more that biracial literature is used in the classroom, the more it allows students to create and see a counter-narrative apart from the mainstream narrative. This idea is called

“counter-storytelling,” which is defined by Hughes-Hassell as “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told, including people of color, women, gays, and the poor” and it aims “to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority” (215). This idea of counter-storytelling is discussed not only by Hughes-Hassell, a researcher and professor at University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, but also by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a prominent Nigerian novelist who discusses the idea in her 2009 TED Talk “The Danger of a Single Story.” When Adichie moved to the United States, her roommate asked her “where she learned to speak English so well” and if she could listen to her “tribal music” (Adichie). Adichie’s roommate had a single narrative of what Africa was and what it meant to be African, and when she was confronted by a counter-narrative the roommate’s worldview was shaken, and she began to see Africa, Africans, and African heritage and culture in a different light.

Just like Adichie, many students who differ from the majority’s identity can feel marginalized from the mainstream culture because of the too often singular narratives told about them and their lives. This feeling can be compounded for students who identify as biracial because “biracial teens often experience guilt at not being able to identify with all aspects of their heritage, and this guilt frequently leads to anger, shame, or self-hatred” (Hughes-Hassell 221). These students lack mixed-race role models in general and even more so outside of their immediate community, and if their role models do not break free from the single story narrative about being of mixed race then it is more unlikely that such students would know how to or be able to identify as biracial and what that means without intervention. Also, “[a]lthough identity formation is a critical task for all, adolescent researchers have found that adolescents of color and

indigenous teens are more likely to be actively engaged in exploring their racial and ethnic identity than are white adolescents [...] [T]eens of color, indigenous teens, and biracial teens think of themselves in terms of race or ethnicity because that is how the rest of the world sees them” (Hughes-Hassell 218). As this population of students grows in the classroom, the unique challenges they face is something that teachers can help them navigate through via usage of more biracial literature in the classroom. These works of fiction can contribute to providing students with an accurate representation of what it is like to grow up with a mixed identity, enable them to better see the problems these characters who are similar to them often face, and see how these characters reconcile their identity and accept their biracial heritage.

For non biracial students these novels are equally important to read, but for different reasons. These works allow students who are not biracial to see another perspective on life they might not otherwise see, critical in a world that is more multi-ethnic than ever. According to Susan M. Landt, Associate Professor at St. Norbert’s College, using literature to showcase other cultures helps to bridge cultural divides better because: “Rather than reading about cultures in a fact-filled text- book, students experience a culture through the eyes of other adolescents” (691). While most of these books have a significant focus on problems that biracial people specifically face, they still function as young adult literature and deal credibly with the same issues many young adults face; the issues are just compounded within the realm of racial identity. “They get to see people their age meeting challenges and solving problems. Unfamiliar aspects of other cultures— language, dress, beliefs—are less foreign when viewed through the lens of familiar issues” (Landt 691).

Biracial young adult literature helps to create a space where all students can safely learn

about and question the problems biracial people face while also making important connections to their own lives. According to Landt, “When students reading about diverse cultures discover similarities with their own, they begin to look beyond the differences and take a step toward appreciating the cultural connectedness of all humanity” (692).

Often times students may feel uncomfortable confronting the idea and concept of race because they may feel as though they do not understand what it is like to be a person of color, are unknowledgeable about the subject, and may fear being judged; however, these novels can help students safely learn about what it means to be biracial as they also consider issues common to many teens. The texts can open up avenues for conversation in the classroom that are not usually available.

Novels with biracial protagonists can also help to curb the tide of bullying in schools. According to the National Bully Prevention Center (2016) bullying is extremely prevalent in schools with “more than one out of every five” students being bullied (National Bullying Prevention Center 1). According to Kristina Gamble of Western Kentucky University, 15.5% percent of biracial children are bullied (Gamble 27). While many students are bullied, it has been found that “more than half of bullying situations (57%) stop when a peer intervenes on behalf of the student being bullied” (National Bullying Prevention Center). Biracial young adult literature can help to combat race based bullying and stereotyping by showcasing how being bullied based upon race can hurt others and its effects. By reading biracial young adult literature which features bullying, teachers can incorporate lessons and education that provides students with some of the tools needed to confront bullying when they see it.

Novels that deal with biracial concerns can also help students confront the idea of a

single, national narrative and the reasons behind such a narrative, namely an institutionalized and unconscious bias that is often carried about people who appear different based solely on the color of their skin. According to the University of Notre Dame's Counseling Center mission statement, the danger in having a single narrative is this:

[R]acial stereotypes are harmful because they ignore the full humanity and uniqueness of all people. When our perceptions of different races are distorted and stereotypical, it's demeaning, devaluing, limiting, and hurtful to others. In some cases, people who are repeatedly labeled in negative ways will begin to develop feelings of inferiority. Sometimes, these feelings of inadequacy can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies that perpetuate the stereotype. Racial stereotypes can also foster feelings of hate and aggression that might lead to a false sense of entitlement and superiority. For those individuals who have power, this can lead to their engaging in discriminatory and racist practices. (University of Notre Dame Counseling Center, web accessed)

Biracial novels can be a useful conduit to approaching topics such as those described above without making students feel demonized for the role our dominant discourse plays in the perpetuation of stereotypes, bias, and racism. By showing students the intricacies of the lives of people who may be different from them, they can begin to confront these topics at a personal and socio-cultural level and become educated, enlightened, active participants in dismantling some of the structures that harm race relations.

By exploring issues of justice and equality through incorporating stories about biracial lives into the secondary classroom, teachers are educating students on more than just subject matter; they are educating them in life skills and understanding. According to Dr. Tabitha

Dell'Angelo, an Assistant Professor and Coordinator of the Urban Education Master's Program at The College of New Jersey, "Social justice is recognizing and acting upon the power that we have for making positive change" (Dell'Angelo 1). Many teachers fear engaging in discussion, much less entire units, built around issues of social justice. Words like social justice, equality, race and the like have become polarized, but as an educator it is a teacher's duty to confront these polarizing topics and educate students to how they can help create a more fair and equitable world. According to Landt, "exposing students to a broader view of the world and reducing prejudice and misunderstanding [through the use of biracial young adult literature]—are important objectives for teachers" and utilizing this literature as a medium for these discussions can help to broach these topics not from a polarizing standpoint, but from a communicative and collaborative standpoint (694). There are many resources that teachers can utilize, such as edutopia.org, teachingforchange.org, and tolerance.org, so that they have the tools to teach social justice in the classroom, no matter what their subject matter happens to be.

Teaching novels that deal with issues that may not be their own can be helpful for teachers as well as for students as it forces them to expand their cultural knowledge of the people they share community with and to confront their own potential stereotypes, biases, and racism. According to Landt, "If multicultural literature were an integral part of education, preservice teachers would not be struggling to comprehend the necessity for infusing their teaching with a diversity of readings and images for their students" (694). Oftentimes preservice teachers are not prepared to educate students using biracial or multicultural literature because:

Teachers may not feel that they are sufficiently knowledgeable to select appropriate multicultural literature for their students. Overwhelmed with the already high demands of

teaching, they may not have time for in-depth research required to locate and evaluate suitable selections. Teachers may decide it is better to avoid integrating multicultural literature with their curriculum rather than take the chance of including inappropriate choices (Landt 691).

According to Christopher Palmi et al. of Lewis University, “close to 90 percent of their teachers are not [from an ethnic/racial minority group]” (Palmi et al. 12). With most teachers continuing to be part of the majority Caucasian group, there can be great benefit in bridging a cultural gap with stories of those who may not look like them because “[w]hen the cultural gap is large, teachers struggle to connect with their students,” (Palmi et al. 13). However, as teachers, we should seek to overcome this gap for our students and for ourselves.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, students in the United States spend “6.64” hours a day in school, leading us to understand that teachers play a crucial role in helping to shape not only students' identities but also their beliefs, understandings of the world, and their compassion for others (NCES). According to Palmi et al., “[t]eachers must purposefully provide opportunities for students to read extensively and use literature as one way to think deeply and critically about their own worlds as well as the worlds of others.” The researchers suggest that, “multicultural literature can serve as a mirror of students’ own cultures and a lens through which they can view the cultures of others” (Palmi et al 13). By providing opportunities for students to learn about cultures other than their own, teachers do students a great service by opening up the world and fostering the development of understanding and acceptance of others.

There are no negative consequences to the inclusion and usage of biracial young adult literature (YAL) in the classroom for any of the parties involved. Everyone benefits. Students

who are biracial benefit because many have not seen themselves in the protagonist role nor have they seen the issues of identity they face in a culture that largely ignores them in the texts they read. By reading such literature, these students may come to feel a connection to their own personal histories that they have never before experienced and may begin to feel more control in overcoming the identity crisis that sometimes presents itself around issues of race. Students who are not biracial benefit because it allows them to begin to break apart the single narrative about other races that they have perhaps come to believe, learn about others, develop a sense of compassion and understanding, and learn how to overcome adversity just as their biracial counterparts must. Teachers benefit because it further opens their eyes to issues their students may face, allows them to bridge the cultural gap between self and students, provides more teaching opportunities, and opens up the stage for discussion about the role of race in our culture.

The biracial young adult novels that will be explored in this thesis are *The Latte Rebellion* by Sarah Jamila Stevenson, *Mexican Whiteboy* by Matt de la Peña, and *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang. These novels focus on young adults of different biracial identities who struggle with the issues their identity creates. While the characters face many difficult situations because of their racial identity, they also face some of the typical struggles of growing up and being adolescent. These novels are extremely useful for the classroom because they can reach a wide variety of students and can teach many lessons about growing up biracial and simply what it means to grow up in today's world.

The Latte Rebellion

The Latte Rebellion by Sarah Jamila Stevenson focuses on the story of biracial senior Asha Jamison and her friends, Carey and Miranda, as they create a club called the Latte Rebellion, a club for mixed people of color who feel unable to join a single race minority club. This novel focuses on the issues of biracial identity, acceptance, and social justice; these are all issues that are important for students to have exposure to and learn about for personal as well as communal reasons.

The novel opens with Asha and Carey being teased by classmate Roger Yee, for being “barely Asian” and the girls express how unwelcome they feel joining the Asian American Association at school because they ‘aren’t Asian enough’ (Stevenson 2). According to Traci P. Baxley, Assistant Professor at Florida Atlantic University quoting, Duty, Kazemi, & Bale (2005), “Because biracial identities ‘potentially disrupt the white/‘of color’ dichotomy, and thus call into question the assumptions on which racial inequality is based,’ society has a difficult time acknowledging this section of the population” (230). In response to feeling excluded from a club they have every right to join, the girls decide to create a club specifically for biracial people in order to help address issues biracial people face in their lives. The Latte Rebellion springs from the idea that lattes are “two things. Coffee mixed with milk. Sometimes with a sprinkle of cinnamon on top. Just like us. We’re living lattes. [...] We’re not really one or the other, ethnically” (Stevenson 12). This sentiment expresses how many biracial students often feel. According to Baxley, “Biracial children and their families are often marginalized by members of mono racial heritage” and often “biracial children [feel they] must *choose* to identify with one racial heritage only, usually that of a minority heritage” (Baxley 230). They cannot take the

identity of any one race as society seems to expect them to do, and often, if they try, they are excluded just like Asha and Carey are from the Asian Student Association. Biracial youth are of multiple races, ethnicities, and identities, and trying to choose just one identity is not only impossible, but it is also blasphemous. No one should be forced to identify in ways that feel uncomfortable, and this is an issue that is tackled in *The Latte Rebellion*.

At first, the club the girls decide to form is just a money seeking venture intended to sell t-shirts for a post-graduation vacation, but it eventually evolves into much more than that. Soon, the Latte Rebellion spreads across campuses and high schools around the country and develops into a social movement for the acknowledgment of mixed people and the struggles they face in a culture that often ignores and sometimes demonizes their existence. As the club grows in scope and visibility, balancing all of the responsibilities that typical teenagers have to deal with and being the organizers of such a politically and emotionally explosive club starts to take a toll on its creators. According to the American Psychological Association, “Many teens also report feeling overwhelmed (31 percent) and depressed or sad (30 percent) as a result of stress” (APA). Asha’s grades drop as she focuses more on the rebellion, which makes her parents push her even harder in school. Her friendship with Carey becomes strained as the rebellion grows across because Carey is not as involved in what the Rebellion is about. The rebellion forces her to keep up appearances as Agent Alpha, leader of the rebellion. Asha finds herself being pulled in many directions while trying to do so much, something many teens face. According to the American Psychological Association, “Despite the impact that stress appears to have on their lives, teens are more likely than adults to report that their stress level has a slight or no impact on their body or physical health” (APA). The amount of stressors our students face should be concerning to all,

and *The Latte Rebellion* accurately depicts the struggle many students face when trying to do too much, and it can help students to see someone struggling with time management just like they are.

The Latte Rebellion not only focuses on the creation of the Latte Rebellion club, but also focuses on typical young adult issues. Like many teens their age, Asha and her friends have many expectations placed on them while dealing with the everyday problems of being young. According to the US Department of Health and Human Services (2016), high schoolers on average spend, “8.6” hours asleep, “6.8” hours in education, and another “8.6” on media, leisure, eating, sports, grooming, religious activities, work or volunteering, and other (US Department of Health and Human Services). Adolescents have many things that need their attention and keeping all of these things in balance can be difficult. The characters are high achieving students who are working to get scholarships to prestigious universities. Because of that they try to have extracurricular activities that put them ahead of the crowd so they might stand out from others applying to these schools. They try to please their parents. They do homework and babysit their siblings. They spend time with their families. They fall in love and have crushes. These are all issues that every young adult deals with, and these characters offer learning opportunities and identifiable situations to all students who read this book, regardless of race or ethnicity.

Asha is a good role model for readers because she is not perfect. She does not always balance her life entirely well and things do not always work out. Her grades slip, and her parents get upset. She does not realize Carey has different priorities and interests and fights with her best friend. Asha does not get into the schools she wants and gets deferred, causing her additional stress. But one thing students can take away from this novel is that Asha overcomes these

difficulties. This novel weaves together a coming-of-age story with a poignant commentary on race, activism, and identity in modern American culture and society. *The Latte Rebellion* is a great novel for usage in the classroom because of the important conversations it can generate for all types of students.

Students who are biracial will have the chance to examine their lives as mixed people and their place in the world. A text where they see their racial identity represented gives these students an opportunity to reflect upon and share their experiences with others while expressing their feelings about growing up as a mixed person in contemporary American society. According to Traci P. Baxley, “Biracial students [typically] are ‘totally invisible in the school’s curriculum: no stories, pictures, articles and reports, books or textbook items that reflect their unique family experiences,’” but as educators we can bring literature into the classroom where they can see themselves (231).

Students who are not biracial are able to see some of the struggles that biracial students face. Oftentimes, “mono racial classmates may not understand [biracial students], and, even worse, may have preconceived notions regarding race” which need to be deconstructed so that students can actually engage in thoughtful and meaningful discussion on race and learn about people of different racial identity (Baxley 230). *The Latte Rebellion* allows them to explore the issues of race and identity in a space where they will not feel judged for their knowledge or lack thereof.

This book also provides valuable commentary on grassroots organizations and the power that people have to change things. The world that students are growing up in is highly politicized and highly controversial. Novels like *The Latte Rebellion* have significant messages of social and

political activism that allow teenagers to feel empowered to use their voice to speak up about issues that matter to them. The world we live in is one that is highly polarized, and the same has happened to words like social justice and privilege that have been exploited by those who disagree with the value they hold. *The Latte Rebellion* is extremely useful because it can provide a positive example of grassroots social justice movements and the importance in advocating for minorities.

Considering some personal reviews from readers, it becomes apparent that *The Latte Rebellion* story resonates with many different types of readers. As one reader states, “This book gave me a lot of food for thought” as a biracial person of color. Other readers loved “the accessibility of the characters” (Goodreads web accessed). Like Hinton and Berry’s (2005) research suggests, when a student reads a novel where the main character deals with issues of race, readers of *The Latte Rebellion* feel validated and visible in books that bring them and their particular situations to the foreground.

The format of the novel may also be intriguing to students. The metafictional story oscillates back and forth between the past as it explains the creation of the rebellion and the present where Asha finds herself coming before the disciplinary committee at her school for her participation in an unapproved rally. This oscillation keeps the reader interested in what is going to happen next and how the story will unfold. This style allows the reader to explore the novel more than a sequential story would because the end product is not what is important; it is the journey that most matters. The journey that Asha finds herself on is one of discovering her passions, who she is as a person, and how her voice matters; these are crucial lessons for young adults to see modeled for them.

The Latte Rebellion shows students not only that their voices matter, but that they can use those voices to enact social change, to call out injustice, and to stand up for what they believe is important. But most importantly this novel shows students that their lives and their struggles are critical to all people. In the story, Asha has an acute interest in social justice which leads her to join the Students for Social Justice Club and then create the Latte Rebellion. This novel can be used to show students that the powers and forces above them may not always be right and that questioning authority and ‘the way things are,’ are necessary faculties for them to have and groom. It is important they learn that dissonance is too often frowned upon and that while others may try to silence one’s voice, it is important to continue to speak up. This novel is so useful in the development of socially conscious students; it can help open students’ eyes to issues of social justice and assist them in taking part in peacefully and purposefully protesting the institutionalized systems that oppress.

Using a novel like *The Latte Rebellion* in the classroom has many benefits for teachers as well. These types of novels are first and foremost developmentally appropriate for students and on their reading levels, which can help to encourage more reading in the classroom. According to Marci Glaus from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, teachers “believe that 20 percent or less of their students read assigned books” (Glaus 407). By using novels in the classroom students can actually relate to, that they may have an interest in, and that can apply to their own lives increases student engagement with texts. Again, according to Glaus who cites a 2013 report by Ivey and Johnston, “the eighth-grade students [...] followed chose edgy YA literature that is ‘intellectually tricky’ (411). “[T]he engagement with the books [...] led to improved test scores but, equally important, provide[ed] space for social and moral development while strengthening

students' identities as readers" (Glaus 411). While books such as *The Latte Rebellion* do open up the classroom for a discussion on heavier topics like race, racism, identity, bullying, etc., few could deny that these are topics young adults need to know about and know how to deal with.

To introduce this novel in the classroom teachers might use a variety of resources that will engage students and open them up to talking about these issues. There are a variety of videos and documentaries on the internet about what it means to be multiracial in America. Especially good are a few that can be found on youtube: "Racial Documentary "Other" Mixed Identity" by Keli Gagen, "What Are You? A Dialogue on Mixed Race" by Mike Peden, and "Who Is Black In America" by Abdul Amari (Gagen, Peden, Amari). Before reading the novel, teachers could show students at least one of these documentaries to engage students with thoughtful and thought-provoking conversations about race. Teachers could also utilize the photography series (1)ne Drop: Shifting the Lens on Race by Dr. Yaba Blay, a professor at North Carolina Central University. This photo series focuses on what it means to be black and biracial in America through the use of pictures of black people. This set could be used to generate a conversation about skin color, race, heritage, and many other topics that *The Latte Rebellion* raises. Another thing that teachers can do is have students research and explore different aspects of what it means to be biracial in America. Understanding the history of being biracial in America can open the door for the discussion of systematic racism, colorism, and oppression that shapes the world our students are living in.

The Latte Rebellion's use in the classroom will help both students who are biracial and non-biracial to have a positive role model protagonist who learns from her mistakes and grows as a person, student, and activist. The novel allows for the opening up of many avenues of

discussion between teacher and students about issues brought up in the novel such as race, prejudice, identity, activism, responsibility, friendship, and family. Fostering these discussions in the classroom is an important job for teachers and produces valuable lessons for students.

American Born Chinese

American Born Chinese, a graphic novel by Gene Luen Yang, focuses on the life of Jin Wang, a first generation Chinese-American who struggles publically to be accepted in American society and privately to accept his Chinese heritage. The full-color novel is split into three parts that coalesce into a complete story. The first section focuses on the Monkey King who is outcast by the gods for being a monkey and for being different from them, thus tries to change himself. The second section focuses on Jin Wang as he moves to a predominately white school in Junior High. The third section focuses on a boy named Danny who is actually Jin Wang transformed into a blonde haired, blue eyed white boy visited by his stereotypical Chinese cousin Chin-Kee who continually ruins Danny's life. By examining the three sections of this story, readers note a common theme of the immigrant experience, the issue of being accepted by others, and appreciating the uniqueness of our own person, something that is vital for all students to learn.

The section focused on the Monkey King considers the ruler of the Flower-Fruit Mountain. The Monkey King is a powerful deity who has mastered “the four major heavenly disciplines, prerequisites to immortality” (Yang 10). Even though the Monkey King is powerful, when he goes to the dinner party of the Gods, he is refused entry because, as he is told, “you may be a king—you may even be a deity— but you are still a monkey” (Yang 15). Later he achieves being more than a monkey, much to the chagrin of the forces of the universe. Tze-Yo-Tzuh, the creator of “all of existence,” comes to the Monkey King to remind him that he is a monkey and will always be a monkey and that is okay (Yang 70). Tze-Yo-Tzuh then traps the Monkey King under a pile of rubble to teach him a lesson. After some time a monk, Wong Lai-Tsao, is chosen by Tze-Yo-Tzuh to retrieve the Monkey King from his rubble prison and asks the Monkey King

to accompany him on a journey. This journey leads the Monkey King to self-acceptance and to helping another, Jin Wang, overcome and find his own self-acceptance.

The second section focuses on Jin Wang, a first generation Chinese-American student growing up in San Francisco Bay Area who attends a predominantly white school. In school, Jin faces many stereotypes and the prejudices of being Asian American, in addition to the usual trials and tribulations of growing up. Jin is bullied for what others believe is how he lives and who he is: a Chinese person who can't speak English and who eats companion animals.^e Even though he knows these things are not true and do not define him, Jin eventually wishes he could be like everyone else. He befriends Wei-Chen Sun, who is actually the Monkey King's son in disguise, a "F.O.B. Fresh off the boat" immigrant from Taiwan (Yang 89). As the boys grow up and enter into their first relationships, their friendship becomes strained. After this Jin is "transformed," and he turns his back on his Chinese heritage and assimilates into the white culture surrounding him. The person he sees in the mirror is a white boy, and Jin renames himself Danny, who is the main character of the third section.

Danny is a typical white American boy who has a stereotypical Chinese cousin named Chin-Kee. Chin-Kee cannot say 'Ls,' his luggage is large Chinese takeout containers, he is an academic prodigy, eats companion animals such as cats and dogs, and is obsessed with carrying on his lineage through marriage and children. Chin-Kee fulfills the model minority Danny (Jin) has tried to escape for so many years leading to a physical fight where Danny knocks off Chin-Kee's head revealing the Monkey King. The Monkey King comes to guide Jin as his "conscience, as a sign post to your soul" and he tells Jin "I would have saved myself from five-hundred years' imprisonment beneath a mountain of rock had I only realized how good it is

to be a monkey” (Yang 221, 223). In the end, Jin accepts that he cannot change the fact that he is Chinese and that others will treat him differently, but that he can control how he perceives himself and that life is easier when he accepts himself.

American Born Chinese is a well studied and critically analyzed novel for usage in the classroom. Critics have heralded it as a dynamic coming of age story that “is interested in what is hidden from view. Outward identities lead inexorably to secret identities, and bodies are always capable of transforming themselves—much like the transformer robots that Jin and Wei-Chen liked to play with when they first met” (Stratman 493). *American Born Chinese* tackles the problems that students face as they age as well as problems relating to race, ethnicity, and identity for children who grow up in blended worlds. It allows students who may not face these problems to see what life is like for someone unlike themselves. “Like Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye and Laurence Yep’s Dragonwings, this novel explores the impact of the American Dream on those outside the dominant culture” (Crawford 146). *American Born Chinese* accomplishes this not only through narrative, but through art as well. Something many students will enjoy.

American Born Chinese is helpful for biracial students because they can relate to Jin’s struggle of growing up in a blended world and his misguided effort to change himself in order to fit into what he believes is normal. While some mixed worlds are racially based as being a part of two different races, the concept Jin faces is still the same. Again, seeing someone go through these struggles of identity can be extremely beneficial to all kinds of students. *American Born Chinese* also teaches the lesson of self-acceptance as this is the journey the characters of the novel are on and the lesson they learn in the end.

Students who grow up in blended worlds, whether because of race, ethnicity, or culture will be able to relate to the struggles Jin faces, especially on the subject of bullying. According to the National Bullying Prevention Center, out of the minority groups of students who identify as ‘other’ approximately 16% have been bullied on the basis of their race, “children with disabilities [are] two to three times more likely to be bullied than their nondisabled peers, 74.1% of LGBT students [have been] verbally bullied, 60% of the heaviest students [are] bullied, 54% of Asian American students, 31.3% of White students, 38.4% of African Americans students, and 34.3% of Hispanic students also have been bullied based on their race (NBPC). Asian American students face an extremely high level of bullying, making *American Born Chinese* an especially important book to read, but across the board far too many students experience bullying. Seeing how Jin deals with bullying can help students see that bullying is harmful in many ways, and that they should not condone it in their peer groups. A novel like *American Born Chinese* can be extremely helpful for students who face bullying. This novel exposes students to the fact that bullying someone because of their race hurts, even if the bullying is not what one might consider bullying like in the case of simply perpetuating “good” stereotypes about Asians without any physical bullying occurring.

Students of Asian-American descent are stereotyped as, according to Qin Zhang an Assistant Professor of Communication at Fairfield University, “academic overachievers and nerds lacking appropriate social and communication skills” and they are often looked at as the “model minority” (Zhang 1). The model minority myth is something that can be difficult to perceive as a bad thing because, according to Alice Li in her 2016 TedTalk called “Why Asian Americans are not the Model Minority” she asks, “how do you object to stereotypes that sound

like compliments?” (Li). If an Asian American student does not fulfill the stereotypes of “playing piano and violin, liking math and science, and thinking about being pre-med” then they may feel ostracized and apart from their peers (Li). Allowing students to break free from the single narrative they have in their heads about different races, ethnicities, and identities is what this novel is especially good at doing and showing.

This novel is useful for all students because Jin is a developing adolescent. He has crushes on girls and fights with his best friend. Many students will relate to Jin’s crush on Amelia and how being around her makes him nervous. They will think about the first time they noticed small quirks about their crush. They might remember their own first date and how mortifying it was. They will remember the first time they fought with or lost a best friend. A crucial draw of this novel is that the aspects of young adulthood that are approached outside of race are ones that any young person who picks it up may relate to, while also learning more about issues of identity and race that others experience.

When using *American Born Chinese* in the classroom teachers should focus their lesson on acceptance of others and self and overcoming stereotypes and prejudices. Teachers can utilize a variety of documentaries on youtube that concentrate on the Asian American experience including the already mentioned Alice Li’s “Why Asian Americans are not the Model Minority,” Canwen Xu’s “I Am Not Your Asian Stereotype,” and BuzzFeed Yellow’s “Asian Americans Respond To Racist Comments” (TedTalks Li; TedTalks Xu; and BuzzFeed Yellow). These documentaries focus on the lives of Asian Americans and the struggle they face to be accepted into the predominant white culture without having to subscribe to the Asian stereotype. *American Born Chinese* can be used to help students confront their preconceptions about race, in particular

here Asian Americans, and to promote tolerance. The novel can also help students learn that accepting one's self is the most important thing a person can do.

Because it is a graphic novel, *American Born Chinese* can also be utilized in a classroom with students who struggle with reading. In Cheryl Gomes and James Bucky Carter's article "Navigating through Social Norms, Negotiating Place: How *American Born Chinese* Motivates Struggling Learners" the focus on utilizing *American Born Chinese* is in a "ninth-grade Special Education English class" (Gomes & Carter 68). The students in the classroom "read 3.6 years behind their grade level [and] these students often think literally rather than abstractly, often preventing them from being able to identify literary elements" (Gomes & Carter 68). Gomes and Carter framed the reading of the novel around common issues within *American Born Chinese* including stereotyping. In their conversation with students about stereotypes, they utilized John Gaughan's Four Corners Activity, where students physically show by moving into spaces where they or their peers stand on a controversial social issue. This is a great tool for teachers to utilize in the classroom to open up the discussion of stereotypes and prejudice as it stimulates learning through movement, listening, thinking, and decision-making around a controversial subject. Assignments and activities like this should be done after the classroom community has been formed and the expectations of respect have been laid out to circumvent any potential issues. The novel helped the particular students in the Gomes and Carter study learn about literary elements because they were depicted visually. According to the researchers, "students with reading disabilities have difficulty creating mental images from spoken or written language, and providing them with the images can improve comprehension of a subject" (Gomes & Carter 71). This article provides additional tools and examples that any teacher could use when teaching

American Born Chinese while also creating a unit that focuses on teaching students about tolerance and acceptance.

American Born Chinese is an important coming of age novel that teachers looking for ways to discuss issues of race and ethnicity as well as other more traditional aspects of language arts should incorporate into their classroom. The novel can help facilitate discussion of common issues that teenagers deal with such as crushes, peers, and family obligations. It can also allow for the discussion of deeper issues such as bullying, racism, stereotyping, and acceptance.

American Born Chinese is a novel that can help students of color learn to begin to accept and celebrate their differences. At the same time, it can help the majority students to learn about the issues that their peers can face if they are from a biracial or multicultural background. As shown, *American Born Chinese* can also be used to help struggling readers and students with disabilities engage at a deeper level with a text than they might normally be able to do. *American Born Chinese* is an important work that can be utilized in the classroom with great profit for the education and well-being of all kinds of students.

Mexican Whiteboy

Matt de la Peña's *Mexican Whiteboy* focuses on Danny Lopez's summer staying with the Mexican side of his family in National City. Danny is mixed, half white and half Mexican and lives with his white mother in San Diego. His father abandoned the family and went back to Mexico when Danny was twelve. Danny feels as if his whiteness is what pushed his father away. He feels a distinct disconnect from his Mexican culture, family, and heritage. Danny is different from the kids who live in the barrio: He does not speak Spanish, in fact he barely speaks at all, he dresses differently, and attends private school. Danny is a fantastic baseball player; he can throw a 95mph fastball, but he is not on a team because unfortunately, he chokes up every time he's on the mound. He uses self harm to control his emotions and as a coping mechanism to deal with the struggles in his life. The summer he spends in National City begins Danny's journey of self-discovery and adventure.

Danny first encounters Uno in National City, a teenager who is half African-American and half Hispanic, when he he defeats him in the neighborhood baseball derby and the boys get into a fistfight. Even though the boys have a tumultuous meeting and beginning, Danny and Uno become friends and learn to help each other overcome obstacles and achieve their individual goals of escaping the barrio and being with their fathers. The boys bond over their love of baseball, their complicated relationship with race, class, identity, and their fathers. Over the summer they work together to improve their baseball skills and in turn change their lives. He learns to control his emotions and begins to take control of his life. Eventually Danny discovers his father is in jail for possibly abusing his mother, but Danny is not broken by this fact. He

transforms from the selectively mute and wildly emotional young adult to a young man in control of his emotions who can weather the things life throws at him.

Mexican Whiteboy has received stellar reviews for the writing, the characters, and the issues the novel tackles. Danny's journey to accept his mixed-race identity and the obstacles he faces because of this is something inspiring to the reader. For readers who are biracial, it allows them to see themselves in the novel. According to Ana [a high school student in Arizona], "Most books I read, I don't know the people," Ana [a high school student in Arizona] said, "This book is the truth" (Winerip 1). This novel is useful to those who do not face these same biracial or multicultural identity issues as well because of the text's accessibility and the story telling. As one reviewer on Goodreads responded, "I found a way to connect with every single character throughout this book, despite having experienced NOTHING similar to any of them" (Goodreads web accessed). This novel is also great for reluctant readers, especially male readers because of the focus on sports. According to one reader on Goodreads, this is one of only three books "where I found the sports writing also worked" (Goodreads web accessed). Cheryl Preisendorfer of "School Library Journal" says that "This is an essential purchase for communities serving Latinos, urban, and reluctant readers" (Preisendorfer 1). Because *Mexican Whiteboy* focuses on the intersections between race, class, and identity, it has come under attack because of this.

Mexican Whiteboy has an interesting history in its usage in the classroom. In Arizona in 2012, "a new state law targeting Mexican-American studies courses that are perceived as anti-white was upheld, [and] it became illegal to teach *Mexican Whiteboy* in Tucson's classrooms" (Winerip 1). The law prohibited any classes that could potentially overthrow the government. The Mexican-American studies classes were attacked by Tom Horne, the

superintendent, who accused “the district’s Mexican-American studies program of using an anti-white curriculum to foster social activism” (Winerip 1). Even though an audit found that “students who took Mexican-American studies were more likely to attend college and that the program helped close the achievement gap” these programs were still attacked by the state government for having the gall to talk about the systematic oppression of people of color throughout their histories (Winerip 1). Teaching is a political act and educators have to be willing to stand up, take risks in their classrooms, and always work towards their student’s greater good. While the community was forced to stand down facing a \$15 million dollar penalty, when de la Peña visited a local Tucson school he said, “If the classes are offered, take them; if not, try to get them back” (Winerip 1).

Mexican Whiteboy has important connections to many things that are occurring in modern day society. During recent years there has been a rise in anti-Mexican and Mexican American rhetoric, something that became very apparent in the 2016 election race. The current president, Donald Trump, is on record expressing extreme anti-Mexican sentiment saying “They’re [Mexico] sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with [them]. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people” (Schwartz 1). Students of Hispanic descent make up “12.5 million” or “25 percent” of the students in American schools as of 2013, yet accusations such as this is what they hear about themselves (National Center for Education Statistics 2010). Clearly, with public rhetoric about them being so negative, all students can benefit from novels that depict this group in a positive manner.

In a recent study Nour Kteily, a psychologist from Northwestern University, asked participants to rate the humanness of different groups to see how and if the various groups were discriminated against. On average, a Mexican immigrant was rated as only “83.7” percent human (Resnick 1). According to Brian Resnick, a science writer for Vox, “it’s become shockingly commonplace for Americans to blatantly dehumanize Muslims and Mexican immigrants — and then use violence against them” (Resnick 1). When blatant racism is thrown in the faces of students and of classrooms how can it be productively and humanly confronted? literature and the exposure it might bring to the issues Hispanic and Latino students face is one way teachers can help unpack the myths being propagated in public. Novels like *Mexican Whiteboy* can help open the doors to acceptance, understanding, and tolerance by giving students the opportunity to see how ‘the other’ lives and what life is like for them. As students are confronted with these issues, it becomes imperative that teachers help students approach the issues of identity and acceptance that is so pervasive in current American society.

Mexican Whiteboy’ in the classroom can be used to confront the stereotypes that are used against people of Hispanic heritage and the discrimination they face in American society. There is a website called brown-face.com which could be used as a lesson to discuss the historical appropriation of Hispanic/Latino culture and the treatment of these groups in American society. Speeches and statements from various politicians also can be used to dissect what role Hispanic/Latino people play in American society and how they are demonized and villainized. Articles like “Imagine a day without a Mexican” by Charles Garcia for CNN and “What We Know About Illegal Immigration from Mexico” by Ana Gonzalez-Barrera and Jens Manuel Krogstad for Pew Research Center can be used to compare the rhetoric students hear in the

media and from the government in comparison to what the facts actually say. *Mexican Whiteboy* novel can be a gateway to including news articles and other nonfiction sources in the classroom in order to analyze the validity of the news and to critically analyze the news students consume as it relates to issues of ethnicity and race.

A focus on the young adult aspects of the novel shows that the issues covered are important for all young adult readers to learn about. Both Danny and Uno struggle with their relationships with their fathers. According to Kids Count Data Center approximately “24,444,000” children are born into single parent households, the majority which are headed by mothers rather than fathers, something that can be hard for adolescent males to deal with (Kids Count Data Center). The boys struggle with a lack of positive male role models in their lives, something many of our students come up against. Giving students the space to confront the unique family dynamics they may have through using this novel can be extremely useful.

All teenagers also can relate to not fitting in, even if they do not face the same situation Danny does with his Mexican heritage. Everyone has at some point felt what it is like to not fit in with those around them and students may be able to connect to the novel in this way. Along these lines, Danny has to deal with peer pressure. The other kids in the barrio like to engage in drinking, smoking, and sexual activity, and Danny shies away from that. In the novel, Danny’s first crush on Liberty is another thing that most reader can relate to. While most students may not deal with a language barrier, they may have felt unable to communicate with a person they have a crush on, much like Danny. While many might think young adults should not be exposed to these typical teenage year types of behaviors, allowing students to learn about them in a safe way can help them avoid actually engaging in these practices.

Mexican Whiteboy also focuses on issues of class and privilege. Danny recognizes that because of his class he has much more privilege than his Mexican family. He recognizes he has more expensive clothes, that he goes to a nicer school, and that he has a better chance at attaining high education than his peers in the National City. Privilege can be difficult for students to acknowledge, but it is important for them to understand what it means and how they can use it for good and to help others, like Danny and Uno do. Reading *Mexican Whiteboy* can open up these discussions of privilege and how students can help those who lack privilege.

Mexican Whiteboy is a vital novel to include in the secondary classroom; it has so much to offer to students. First, this novel is a fantastic read and will draw in students of all types. It will draw in those who face similar issues involving race, class, and identity. It will draw in reluctant readers because this is an accessible book for them, and it also will draw in students, especially boys, interested in sports. Danny and his growth from beginning to the end of the novel is something that many readers can learn from. From the viewpoint of young adulthood, this is a valuable novel because many issues that adults would like to shield teenagers from are located and examined within its pages. The exploration of typical young adult issues such as peer pressure, first relationships, and friendship are of interest to many young readers and de la Pena handles the topics well. *Mexican Whiteboy* also opens up the classroom for a discussion of what it means to have Hispanic/Latino heritage in America today. It allows students to talk about the anti-Mexican rhetoric they take in from various media sources and gives them the chance to confront this (mis)information and learn to critically analyze what is being told to them. Allowing students to learn how to critically analyze the news and form their own opinions on the

issues is a valuable tool that teachers can put into their students' toolboxes to be used in helpful ways as they learn to function in modern day society.

Conclusion

While exploring the inclusion of biracial literature in the secondary classroom, I have discovered many interesting things. The most significant benefits of using biracial literature in the high school classroom is that biracial literature in the classroom allows students of color to explore their identity, allows them to feel represented in the classroom, and provides role models who are similar to them in a variety of ways. For non-biracial students, the major benefits are that students are exposed to some of the many issues that their classmates may have experienced, while also recognizing that they too deal with some similar issues of adolescence. These novels allow for the facilitation of a discussion on race and identity, allow students to be exposed to identities and cultures they may not interact with much, and help unpack the single cultural narrative students may have already come to believe is absolute for different marginalized groups. These novels also can help educate students about bullying and aspects of social justice. They can provide tools students need to combat bullying and to advocate for themselves and others. Teachers using these novels in the classroom may be able to more adequately educate all students on the history of the issues biracial people face, enable students to explore the social and cultural aspects behind the societal representation of minorities, and incorporate more young adult literature in the classroom in order to consider the contemporary issues biracial students face, something canonical literature cannot sufficiently do.

Biracial literature has a place in the classrooms not only because so many students are biracial in the schools, but also because students live in a diverse world. As noted in the introduction, the biracial population continues to grow at record rates. As the population expands, the collection of novels used in the classroom should represent the actual racial makeup

of our country and our students. According to Sandra Hughes-Hassell, the incorporation of biracial literature can help biracial students to “establish personal connections with characters, increasing the likelihood that reading will become an appealing activity” (214). This is a very important point. When students see themselves in the classroom, they have a stronger connection to the works, and this can encourage them to read more. Finding a way to motivate students to read more and enjoy what they are reading because they relate to or can learn from should be at the forefront of every teacher’s goals. Novels such as the ones discussed here can help student reconcile identity in context of the dominant culture. Quoting William Cross, one of the leading researchers in the field of ethnic identity development, “children of color and indigenous children absorb many of the beliefs and values of the dominant white culture, including the belief that it is better to be white” (Hughes-Hassell 219). At the ages students will be in the secondary classroom, they “become aware of the impact of racism” and they “begin to wrestle with what it means to be a member of a group that is targeted by racism” (Hughes-Hassell 219). Students must fight “negative stereotypes, resist internalizing negative self-perceptions, and affirm the meaning of ethnicity for oneself” so that they can accept their identity (Hughes-Hassell 219). These novels can provide role models for how to counteract negative internal and external perceptions and offer ways to rise above the single cultural narrative about a race.

For non-biracial students, these novels also have a place. Students who are not minorities may not generally consider the obstacles students of color face because they have not had the same experiences of oppression and racism. By exposing students to the experiences their classmates face, teachers can foster more understanding and a more compassionate classroom community. Talking about race, class, and identity are topics typically avoided in the classroom,

but they are crucial conversations. The benefits of having these conversations in the classroom are that the spread of misinformation can be combatted. By fostering these conversations in class, teachers can make sure their students are learning the historical and social context that make these novels important. Presenting social justice issues as common peaks of knowledge for all students and citizens should be a goal of teachers. These novels advocate for biracial students and take deep looks into some of the major issues they will face in their lives. According to Pew Research Center, in 2010 19% of biracial people felt disadvantaged because of their race. Building literary units around these books can help students learn how to advocate for their minority classmates and teach them how to use their voices to support their classmates.

When exploring potential social justice throughout these novels, it becomes clear that these stories can help students advocate for each other and prevent problems like bullying. Many students are affected by bullying, but others can help to prevent it. In *The Latte Rebellion*, Asha and her friends fight for recognition as mixed people of color, against stereotyping of biracial people, and against bullying and targeting from their peers. In *American Born Chinese*, Jin, Danny, and the Monkey King fight against bullying because of their culture and for acceptance from others and themselves. In *Mexican Whiteboy*, Danny and Uno fight against oppression because of their biracial heritage and for acceptance of their past. By using these novels in the classroom, teachers can teach students about the intersections between race, class, and privilege. While these subjects can be difficult to talk about, teachers can frame these discussions with the resources utilized throughout this paper to promote using things like privilege to advocate for others and protecting others from bullying.

There are many benefits for teachers who incorporate biracial literature into the secondary classroom as well as for their students. Many teachers are not racial minorities and may lack understanding of biracial issues just as their students do. By educating themselves on biracial issues, teachers can better teach students to become compassionate and educated citizens and show them what it means to have a cultural response to texts and the people represented in them. Using these novels can help bridge the gap between teachers and students. Specifically, using young adult biracial literature can be very useful in bridging this gap because the novels contextualize issues within students' developmental and interest range.

Novels like *The Latte Rebellion*, *American Born Chinese*, and *Mexican Whiteboy* can be used in a variety of classrooms and with a variety of students. *American Born Chinese* and *Mexican Whiteboy* are books that have been found to work well with reluctant readers and male students. These two books work well because *American Born Chinese* is a graphic novel that can visually depict literary terms that students may struggle to recognize, and *Mexican Whiteboy* works well because of the inclusion of sports, which will draw in male young adult readers. The language and vocabulary of both is not overly challenging yet still creates a dynamic and relevant story with literary merit. *The Latte Rebellion* is a very modern young adult novel that heavily focuses on the current high schooler experience because the characters struggle with balancing their school, family, and life obligations. These novels deal with issues students have to deal with and often have to deal with alone. In *Mexican Whiteboy*, Danny struggles with his father's abandonment, his anger, and self-harm. In *American Born Chinese*, Jin deals with bullying from his white classmates and losing his best friend. In *The Latte Rebellion*, Asha deals with growing up and apart from friends, possibly getting expelled from school, getting

wait-listed at a college she wants to attend, and pleasing her parents. These novels show typical high school experiences such as friendship, growing up, and young love in very honest terms that students can appreciate. Characters like Danny, Jin, and Asha provide positive role models, who may not be perfect, but who are accurate representations of what a teenager is like. Further, these believable protagonists can help provide students guidance concerning issues they may face in their own lives.

When including biracial literature in the classroom, teachers should have few reservations. Using these texts and others like them have so many benefits to all concerned parties. The novels provide guidance to students who are biracial through their struggles with identity, they educate non-biracial students on what their biracial counterparts have to deal with, they allow all students to learn about critical issues in a safe space, and they help teachers connect with their students while educating them on social justice issues and the importance of advocating for others. Including biracial young adult literature in the classroom can help students begin to overcome the barriers that hold them back, assist them in learning about the systems of oppression that they live in, and learn how to confront and overcome these systems. By using biracial literature in the classroom, teachers can help to create a generation of educated, compassionate, and socially aware students.

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