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Opportunities for Advocacy: Interrogating Multivoiced YAL's Treatment of Denied Identities

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Opportunities for Advocacy:

Interrogating Multivoiced YAL's Treatment of Denied Identities

Leteo is this place of second chances. (Silvera 3-4)

In a slightly futuristic version of our society, Adam Silvera's *More Happy Than Not* (2015) features Aaron, a 16-year-old who considers undergoing the Leteo medical procedure to erase a piece of his identity—his homosexuality. Examining this desire allows readers to consider whether Aaron's decision is wholly elective. His choice is seemingly influenced by societal norms and expectations about sexuality. Several characters within the novel seek to reprogram their identities, and each reveals the intricacies inherent in conceptualizations of choice. A woman in her early twenties wants to stop the schizophrenic voices in her head (83). A soldier suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and seeks to forget his memories of war (155). A boy is overcome with grief when his identical twin is murdered by a gunman who confused the two brothers (3-4). These examples helped us imagine how students might consider whether and how identity denial comes from within or without and how these characters' decisions reveal that choices are sometimes made for us—and how power and equity impact our identities.

Young adult literature (YAL) provides readers with a multivoiced palette that embraces cultures, genders, ages, sexualities, and experiences. Within this array are stories that feature characters who deny elements of their identities or experiences that they find challenging or difficult. Multivoiced literature's treatment of these attempts takes on resonance given the historical and social realities of marginalized cultures and communities often featured in such titles. Providing students with opportunities to examine this literature allows for critical conversations about power and equity and analyses of how identity is both constructed and

perceived. Discussion about how one might choose to deny specific identities can allow students to scrutinize which identities are privileged or denied, affirmed or suppressed.

This paper draws upon the assumptions that identity is not only negotiable and socially constructed but also personally constructed (Gee 1999) and that literature can allow readers to disrupt and interrogate the complex ways in which identity may be socially, politically, and culturally situated (Glenn 2012; Glenn, et al. 2012; Curwood 2013). Asking students to examine critically why characters seek to deny a part of their voices can complicate their understandings of identity. Examining characters who decide to intentionally silence identities can reveal that there may not be a distinction between choosing to be erased versus already being erased. The texts included in this paper force us to interrogate the level of choice these characters actually have when they seemingly “choose” to erase their identities.

The literal identity erasure in *More Happy Than Not* prompted us to examine other instances of identity denial, literal and figurative. As we analyzed how characters attempt to erase their identities, we considered how students might engage in critical conversations about the ways that people in our multivoiced society are silenced both overtly and subtly. Engaging in critical examinations of identity denial allows readers opportunities to interrogate power inequities in society. In the following sections, we provide three classroom units of study that we believe can help students analyze identity erasure and advocate for acceptance of difference across culture and community. We recognize that students might already be engaging in these discussions; these units are designed to help students extend, complicate, and affirm their thinking. Each unit centers on a multivoiced focal text containing elements of identity erasure and includes activities to build knowledge, ideas to prompt rich classroom discussions, and an

advocacy project that invites students to listen closely for voices that are silenced and assume agency.

Immigration Reform: Building Political Awareness and Sharing Perspectives

The first unit features the text, *The Secret Side of Empty*, by Maria E. Andreu (2014). Narrator M. T. is a blonde-haired, blue-eyed senior with the potential to be high school valedictorian. She hides a secret from her teachers and friends—she is an undocumented immigrant from Argentina. As her friends apply for college and get their driver’s licenses, M. T. feels like the only thing in her future is emptiness. She recognizes and is saddened by the White privilege she sees in her peers and feels angry toward inequities she sees in society. Author Maria Andreu draws upon her personal experience as a former undocumented immigrant and illuminates an issue that affects more than a million children in America today. The text allows readers to consider inequities inherent in immigration policies and necessitates conversations about immigration reform.

To consider how immigration impacts individuals in the United States, students might explore responses to the following questions:

1) M. T.’s father says, “You think you’re so smart!... But who are you? You are nothing! You can’t do anything in this country” (56).

In what ways are undocumented immigrants denied access to services, rights, and freedoms? How does this conflict with your conception of the American Dream? Can an undocumented immigrant be successful in this country—and by what definition of success?

2) M. T. reflects:

I will always be a stranger everywhere. With my parents, I am too American. With Americans, I am a spectator with my nose pressed against their windowpanes, watching

their weird rituals and rites of passage, never quite understanding them completely. A little chunk of me will always be a stranger everywhere, different chunks of stranger in different situations. (98)

How is M. T. denied a right to her identity and history because of her position as an undocumented immigrant? Why must she continually “pray for her invisibility ray” (117)? How does she feel distanced from her peers—and what privileges does she recognize that they have? What other groups of people are encouraged or forced to become invisible in our country?

Teachers might guide students to move beyond the text to engage in the following activities to build on their understandings of varying perspectives of immigration and ponder how immigrants’ identities are erased and silenced by American society. Teachers might first learn what students already know about immigration reform and then find resources that build upon students’ existing knowledge, so they can (re)consider how immigrants’ voices and histories may be denied.

Teachers might initiate students’ thinking about immigration by asking them to define the terms, immigrant, illegal immigrant, and undocumented immigrant. They can then set these definitions aside. Students can break into groups to read, consider, and share other perspectives (<http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2012/12/09/understanding-immigration-reform>). Then they might visit pewresearch.org to explore statistics and speeches to learn more about US citizens’, political parties’, and politicians’ views toward immigration reform. They might pair up and quiz each other with the “Immigration Facts and Myths Sheet” from the American Civil Liberties Union (<https://goo.gl/fpB9ck>) and consider who benefits from each of these myths. Lastly, they might watch the film *The Legacy of Shame* (1995), a documentary that explores illegal and legal migrant workers, their living conditions, and the laws that impact them.

After students have pondered multiple perspectives and share common understandings about immigration reform, they might contemplate their own positioning. They might begin by writing down points of debate regarding immigration. In partners or in a “Walk the Line” activity (where students step on either side of a line to show the extent to which they disagree or agree with various statements), students can discuss their positions, which might include:

- *Immigrants offer important contributions to US culture.

- *Undocumented immigrants should not be allowed a path to citizenship.

- *We should change the US Constitution, so that parents must be legal residents for their newborn children to be citizens.

- *Undocumented immigrant children should be allowed to attend schools.

Following this discussion, students could return to their definitions of the terms, immigrant, illegal immigrant, and undocumented immigrant. As a class, they might consider the differences between these terms. M. T.’s teacher says, “Immigrants today are just not like what they used to be in our grandparents’ time” (121). Students might ponder: How have perspectives of immigrants changed throughout our country’s history? How do each of these terms impact others’ perspectives and our own?

Following these discussions about perspective, teachers might provide students with time and space to further explore the silencing of identities and histories of immigrants. They could begin by watching a video that outlines the campaign to “Drop the I-Word” (<https://www.raceforward.org/practice/tools/drop-i-word-campaign>) and discuss whether they think the campaign presents a valid argument or is just an attempt at being politically correct. Teachers can facilitate classroom discussions where students consider other words that deny, devalue, or erase other groups’ identities.

To reach others beyond the walls of the classroom, students might brainstorm how we—as a country, as citizens, as friends, as neighbors—can create a society that affirms rather than denies all identities and histories. Students can select any group whose members’ identities and histories are denied or silenced and then choose a target audience and format for their project (letter, social media page, video, outdoor poster, etc.). Within the project, they can express their perspectives and post, send, or publicize in a way that promotes advocacy for the group they choose.

Connecting Across Generations: A Community Engagement Project Inspired by Story

This unit centers on the focal text, *The Apple Tart of Hope*, by Sarah Moore Fitzgerald (2014). The text, set in Ireland and New Zealand, encourages readers to consider how identity denial affects generations of people across time and location. The story features fourteen-year-old Oscar who is relentlessly bullied and contemplates suicide. When Oscar rides his bicycle off the pier, the town presumes he has died. Oscar survives but chooses not to correct the narrative and instead temporarily erases himself from the community. He is befriended by Barney Brittle, an elderly man who, following the death of his wife, exists on the literal and metaphorical outskirts of town; he is seen as the oddball, the weird old man who lives by the sea. He, too, contemplates, taking his own life. Oscar and Barney develop a relationship that fosters honest communication and a rediscovery of the simple joys in life.

Teachers might draw from the text to guide students to consider the human lifespan and experiences that shape our lives at different stages with the following discussion questions:

1) As Oscar sets up his story for readers, he explains,

I used to be full of energy and happiness but I could barely remember those kinds of feelings anymore. The cheerful, childish things I used to think had been replaced. A

whole load of new realizations had begun to grow inside me like tangled weeds, and they were starting to kill me. That's why I made the decision that involved heading off to the pier on my bike in the middle of the night and cycling off it. (10)

What does Oscar lose in his process of growing up? How might these losses have fostered his desire for identity denial? What were your reasons for living when you were eight? What are your reasons for living now? Is the process of replacement that Oscar describes a natural part of growing up? If it exists, is it always detrimental? How do you imagine your reasons for living might look when you are 80?

2) The novel emphasizes the value of believing in hope that will eventually arrive and replace the sadness of the moment. When Oscar finds Barney Brittle at the shore ready to end his life, he assures the older man, "I know what you might be thinking here on your own, but those thoughts won't last forever.... You won't always feel like this. This will pass. Homer [the dog] will be here for you, and the sun will rise and you'll find your reasons again, the ones you think have deserted you" (30). How does this same logic hold true or fall apart when Oscar himself faces a similar desire to escape the difficulties of his life? Hope seems to imply a positive future, but what happens to hope when you are close to the end of your life? Are hope and memory connected?

To move beyond the text, teachers might then engage with students in cross-generational advocacy activities to build connections across generations in the community and help students consider perspectives of elderly citizens whose rich, lived experiences are not always valued in American society. Students might first engage in a process of conversing and considering by exploring how people of all ages can feel as though they have lost their "reasons." Elderly people comprise a vulnerable population in America, particularly given how society often fails to value

their lived experiences and expertise. As a result, too many elderly people experience a sense of identity denial. Students can extend their understandings about the realities of being old in America by reading and discussing in small groups several worthwhile videos, articles, interviews, etc., including “Living Old” (PBS 2006, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/livingold/>), “Ageism in America” (Associated Press 2013, <http://www.nbcnews.com/id/5868712/ns/health-aging/t/ageism-america/#.V2vfM46yy2Y>), “How Society Misunderstands the Elderly” (*US News* 2012, <http://money.usnews.com/money/blogs/on-retirement/2012/11/26/how-society-misunderstands-the-elderly>), and “The Future of Growing Old in America” (*The Guardian* 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2011/dec/01/future-growing-old-america>).

Teachers might ask students to explore connections to their own experiences by thinking about the stories they know about their family histories—how their families came to settle where they are; the cast of characters that inhabits their past; the tales they have been told about their childhood and those of their parents, uncles, great-grandparents, etc. With a partner, they might discuss the following questions: How have these stories come to you? What can they tell you about who you are? To build upon these personal ponderings, students might then explore how oral history serves as a genre for preserving rather than denying the past. Drawing upon StoryCorps (<https://storycorps.org/>), an independently funded oral history project that allows listeners to hear the stories of others and record their own, students might work with the same partner to explore the site and share with the whole class a brief summary of 1-2 stories that they found particularly compelling.

With this knowledge of elderly life in America and the potential value of stories, students might next work collaboratively to create a memory wall in their local senior center or other location in the community. The wall might contain photos, personal stories, physical artifacts (medals, crafts, mementos), audio files, etc. that capture the lived experiences of the elderly in the site they select. Teachers might also encourage students to draw from resources held by local historical societies or town/city records offices and use social media to solicit photographs from family members, friends, and community members. Following the creation of the memory wall, students might host an unveiling celebration that honors the lives of the elderly at the site. They might invite family members, town/city officials, and the media to extend the reach of their work.

Finally, to allow students to think carefully about this experience and how it influences the perceptions of the elderly by others, teachers might invite them to share the results of this work in an authentic way of their choosing. For example, students might write an informative and reflective piece chronicling the experience for publication in a local newsletter or newspaper, create a brochure that describes the project and process for other school communities to emulate, or generate a proposal for a follow-up project that invites longer, more engaged partnership between students and the elderly in the community.

Racial Identity: Connecting History and Today

This unit centers on the focal text, *The Lions of Little Rock*, by Kristin Levine (2012). This text, written about the Little Rock Crisis and school segregation, asks readers to interrogate prejudice within America during the 1950s and today. Twelve-year-old Marlee doesn't have many friends, so when Liz starts at her school, Marlee feels like she has found her best friend—someone who understands her obsession with math and makes her laugh, helps her find her

voice, and stands up to mean-girl Sally. But then Liz stops coming to school, and Marlee learns that her best friend is not who she thought she was. Liz passes as White to attend a better school, and now she is not to speak to Marlee again. But instead of giving up, Marlee and Liz band together and help fight against the ignorance keeping them apart.

To help students use the text to consider racial identity and how it impacts individuals historically and presently in the US, teachers could guide discussions around the following:

1) Betty Jean explains that Liz and her family attempt passing even though it is dangerous because of “Better schooling. More opportunities... Maybe they’re just tired of being seen as second best” (63).

Why would Liz’s family send Liz to an all-White school knowing that it could be dangerous?

How did Liz have to deny her identity to ensure her safety? Are there similar situations that persons of color find themselves in today, such as having to act according to majority norms in schools, work places, and with law enforcement?

2) The text’s setting is the year after segregation ended in Little Rock and The Little Rock Nine attended Little Rock Central High School. In response to this integration effort, a divide emerged among residents in Little Rock. Those who were brave stood up, but fear caused many to remain silent. Those who were silent may have feared the government discovering their beliefs and taking action (e.g. job firing) or may have feared attack from the KKK and other pro-segregationists. How can the Little Rock Crisis and other parts of the Civil Rights Movement be compared and contrasted with the Black Lives Matter, Teaching Tolerance, and We Need Diverse Books movements of today?

The question above allows students to move from the text and history toward race today. To build further on students’ understandings of varying perspectives of historical and modern

racial identity and civil rights in America, teachers might have students reflect upon Kristin Levine’s Author’s Note, in which she shares the history behind the text. Teachers might use Marlee and Liz’s story to encourage students to examine desegregation and the court ruling in *Brown vs. Board of Education* by reading and discussing in small groups or as a whole class the following articles and websites: *Brown v. Board of Education* (<https://www.nps.gov/brvb/index.htm>), The Leadership Conference (<http://www.civilrights.org/education/brown>), The Brown Foundation (<http://brownvboard.org/>), and “The Modern Civil Rights Movement: A River of Purposeful Anger” (<http://teachinghistory.org/history-content/beyond-the-textbook/24318>). Teachers might help students explore contemporary manifestations of racism and anti-racist strategies by asking students to consider whether segregation still exists, how the Civil Rights movement might be similar to and different from the Black Lives Matter movement, and the difference between equality and equity. Texts that might help guide this discussion include: “Modern-Day Segregation in Public Schools” (<https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/11/modern-day-segregation-in-public-schools/382846/>), Black Lives Matter (<http://blacklivesmatter.com/>), and “The Next Civil Rights Movement?” (<https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/black-lives-matter-new-civil-rights-movement-fredrick-harris>).

Teachers might have students jigsaw a text set to learn from other voices—beyond school segregation—within the Civil Rights Movement. (See fig. 1 for text suggestions.) As an advocacy project, students might work in small groups to consider another group that is marginalized in society. Students could visit the library to read widely about the marginalized groups to form their own text sets around these groups. These text sets could be displayed in the

school and library for others to learn from the voices within these texts. Students who are interested in continuing conversations about race, and more specifically interrogating issues of race in their school and community, could work to start an activist club at the school. This club could develop plans of action to work to increase awareness in the community. Teaching Tolerance, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, provides suggestions for such a club at www.tolerance.org.

Conclusion

Explorations of multivoiced YAL can reveal the ways that voices are silenced within our world. While characters may seemingly choose to deny a part of their identities, there is a certain muddiness about whether the choice is of their own free will or if the choice has essentially been made for them given societal norms, expectations, and biases. The units shared in this article delve into issues of immigration, age, and race, but myriad possibilities exist to invite students to explore identity denial in literature and involve them in advocacy projects reflective of issues in multivoiced literature. We provide further examples of multivoiced YAL that features identity denial in Figure 2. As students participate in the advocacy projects described above, they should be reminded that advocacy does not end with a letter, a billboard, or a social media page. Identities will still continue to be silenced beyond a letter to a congressman or a billboard promoting human rights. Advocacy requires concerted, continual effort. Students can think critically about how their projects may or may not reach their audiences in anticipated ways. They might then write a reflection or proposal that considers other broader, more far-reaching opportunities to further engage in social change.

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Fig. 1. Civil Rights Text Set Suggestions

- Bass, Hester. *Seeds of Freedom: The Peaceful Integration of Huntsville, Alabama*. Candlewick, 2015.
- Pinkney, Andrea Davis. *Sit-In: How Four Friends Stood Up By Sitting Down*. Little, Brown, 2010.
- Powell, Patricia Hruby. *Loving vs. Virginia: A Documentary Novel of the Landmark Civil Rights Case*. Chronicle, 2017.
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- Tavares, Matt. *Henry Aaron's Dream*. Candlewick, 2010.
- Wiles, Deborah. *Freedom Summer*. Atheneum, 2001.

Fig. 2. Other YA Texts for Exploring the Denial of Identity

Frailon, Zana. *The Bone Sparrow*. Disney Hyperion, 2016.

Gemeinhart, Dan. *The Honest Truth*. Scholastic, 2015.

Konigsberg, Bill. *Openly Straight*. Scholastic, 2013.

McCormick, Patricia. *Never Fall Down*. HarperCollins, 2012.

Toten, Teresa. *The Unlikely Hero of Room 13B*. Delacorte, 2015.

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