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A Clash of Cultures Within Contemporary Realistic Fiction

Within the last couple of years, more and more it seems as if situations regarding people of color have been prominent within the news country-wide. The issue of race has been a problem since nearly the beginning of time—from world-wide slavery, the Trail of Tears, the Jim Crow Laws, Zoot Suit Riots, Japanese-American internment camps, to the recent riots in Baltimore, along with many more. On a smaller scale, people of color experience not only the social constructs imposed on them, but it is common to also experience many internal struggles with who they are and how to fit in with society.

I have chosen to do my annotated bibliography centering on the many issues of race in the many young adult literature novels available to teens. I take race issues very personally, as I am of Hispanic descent, and have been surrounded by and experienced some of the struggles ethnic peoples encounter at one point or another in his or her lifetime. Most recently my feelings, thoughts, and beliefs are being challenged, often leaving me confused and in a lack of words due to all of the media surrounding race questions and social issues. One main reason I feel so passionately about the topic race is because even though I am a Mexican-Puerto Rican woman living in the United States, many times I have been told that I am a *pocha*. Being called this term, or the masculine form *pochó*, refers to someone who has lost his or her Hispanic cultural identity and heritage, became very “Americanized,” and most often than not, means that the person does not speak any Spanish. This hurts my soul and makes me feel less than a “real” Hispanic all just

because I have brown skin, black hair, with all the features of a Hispanic person but I just can't speak Spanish. I am still very proud of both of my cultures, and my American culture, as well, but I have been criticized for embracing some Hispanic traditions even though I am very "Americanized". Such teasing as this can lead to embarrassment for the receiver and may result in isolation from peers considered more "pure" in their heritage. This fuels my interest in wanting and hoping that our society's racial differences can be overlooked and for everyone to be treated as equals.

In regards to YA literature, my annotated bibliography will focus on the various struggles that people of color experience such as the emotional, mental, and physical abuse; bullying and ostracizing; society's viewpoint on specific ethnic groups; the internal struggles such as personal thoughts and beliefs; and most importantly, the struggle to understand self-identity in order to be proud of the person he or she is.

Annotated Bibliography

Abdel-Fattah, Randa. *Does My Head Look Big in This?* New York: Scholastic, 2008. Print.

Amal, an Australian-Palestinian girl living in Melbourne, decides to “go full time” and wear her hijab, the Muslim head scarf, at all times. This is a very big decision for Amal because post 9/11 there are a lot of mixed feelings about Muslims all around the world. Amal decides that she wants to show her devotion to her religion by wearing her head scarf at all times knowing how difficult it will be. For example, her parents are concerned about how Amal will feel if she gets any negative attention cast toward her. Her prep school principal has trouble with it and doesn’t want to alter the strict dress code. The students at her school are also confused the first time they see Amal wearing her head scarf, but once they feel comfortable enough to ask questions they come to understand why she wants to wear it (Young Adult Book Reviews: Does My Head Look Big in This? By Randa Abdel-Fattah).

Whenever there is someone or something that appears to be abnormal, it is sure to attract stares and raise questions of curiosity. In the case of Amal and the time being post 9/11, she strongly stands up for her cultural beliefs and knows where she stands with her self-identity despite others who are quick to judge her. This novel is great for those who practice cultural beliefs on a daily basis, such as Muslims and Catholics. It also shows how people from the Middle East were viewed post 9/11 by the rest of the world, and not just in America.

Alexie, Sherman, and Ellen Forney. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. New York: Little, Brown for Young Readers, 2007. Print.

Bestselling author Sherman Alexie tells the story of Junior, a budding cartoonist growing up on the Spokane Indian Reservation. Determined to take his future into his own hands, Junior leaves his troubled school on the rez to attend an all-white farm town high school where the only other Indian is the school mascot (The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian).

It is known that on Indian reservations that poverty and drug and alcohol addiction is all too common among the residents, and often times, these addictions start at an early age. When Junior decides to leave to a new school, he is setting out to better his future despite having to deal with the tough situation of being a “black sheep” in this all white town. Junior’s friendships are tested when he makes this decision and is then ostracized by his former peers. This novel also brings forth the concept of using certain cultures and ethnicities as a mascot for various reasons such as school mascots and even sports.

Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. New York: Vintage, 1991. Print.

Sometimes heartbreaking, sometimes deeply joyous, *The House on Mango Street* tells the story of Esperanza Cordero, whose neighborhood is one of harsh realities and harsh beauty. Esperanza doesn't want to belong—not to her rundown neighborhood, and not to the low expectations the world has for her. Esperanza's story is that of a young girl coming into her power, and inventing for herself what she will become (Sandra Cisneros: Major Works).

Often times in run down communities filled with minorities, children and teens dream of a future where they escape the fate that their parents are in and the expectations imposed on them. For instance, it is thought that women of color are expected to become pregnant early on and become stay-at-home moms, while men of color are expected to work odd jobs to support a growing family. Cisneros' book allow YA readers to experience and grow with Esperanza's vignettes and understand her inner struggles, along with her desires. The novel can also serve as an empowerment tool for young ladies in low-income neighborhoods to be the best that she can and succeed in education.

Crutcher, Chris. *Whale Talk*. New York, NY: HarperTeen, 2009. Print.

Being of Black, Japanese, and White descent, high school senior T.J. Jones is exceptionally gifted with excelling in multiple sports, but he has no interest in using his talents in organized school sports. With the coercion of a teacher, Simet, T.J. forms a school swim team consisting of fellow students deemed unfit to succeed. The novel follows this swim team's progress through the eyes of T.J. while exploring the racial discrimination T.J. faces by a few closed minded White folk, the idea of self-acceptance, along with a sense of belonging to something that each swim team member hadn't had before joining the swim team.

Though Crutcher's novel is considered a sports novel by its content, I would still consider it contemporary realistic fiction as it deals with very real experiences and problems any high school student could go through. This novel not only teaches readers about the ins and outs of swimming on a school team, it also can teach YA literature readers that everyone is different and should embrace their differences, and most

importantly, bullies can only bring down a person if they allow him/her to do so. It is also a fascinating to see a protagonist become a vigilante-type figure for those who cannot stick up for themselves.

Myers, Walter Dean. *Monster*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1999. Print.

Steve Harmon is 16 and African American—he's one of the many young African American males who is at risk to be destroyed by drugs, guns, imprisonment, or some other kind of disaster. He has been at the “wrong place at the wrong time” and now is in jail facing trial for being an accomplice to a felony murder (Warner).

This novel is a great read for any teen of color, particularly African American teens and Hispanic teens, because these two minority groups face very similar living situations as Steve Harmon. These groups of males are much more prone to being involved on the wrong side of the law. Often times these men are not given a chance to explain themselves when need be, but are solely judged on and by the color of their skin. Men of color also face lengthier sentence times compared to their White-male counterparts.

Na, An. *A Step from Heaven*. Speak, 1997. Print

A first novel in which a Korean-American girl tells the story of her acculturation into American life beginning from the day she leaves Korea as a young child and ending when she is a young woman. While going up into the sky on the flight from Korea to America, four-year-old Young Ju concludes that they are on their way to heaven-America is heaven! After they arrive, however, Young Ju and her parents and little brother struggle in their new world, weighed down by the difficulty of learning English, their

insular family life, and the traditions of the country they left behind. An Na's striking language authentically reflects the process of acculturation as Young Ju grows from a child to an adult (Book: A Step from Heaven by An Na).

Immigration is a very common experience that young children and teens go through with their families. It is always hard to uproot from what you know to the new and unknown, especially when there is a huge language barrier that hinders the progress of settling down. Anything is possible with time and faith, and Young Ju is able to succeed in her life despite the hardships presented to her. This novel is fantastic for Asian cultured readers who have experienced similar situations.

Ostow, Micol. *Emily Goldberg Learns to Salsa*. New York: Razorbill, 2007. Print.

Emily is a Jewish girl from the suburbs of New York. Her mother has family in Puerto Rico, but Emily has never had contact with them—ever. Then Emily's grandmother dies and Emily is forced to go to the Caribbean for her funeral. Buttoned-up Emily wants nothing to do with her big, noisy Puerto Rican family, until a special person shows her that one dance can change the beat of your heart (Books for Teens). She finds that not everyone in the family is happy to see them and she learns more about her mother's estrangement from her family. Family, knowledge, tradition, and communication are all themes in this story as a family tries to come together after the death of a matriarch. Emily learns a lot about her heritage and the strength of her mother to fight for what she believes in (Young Adult Book Reviews: Emily Goldberg Learns to Salsa by Micol Ostow).

This novel is different than the others as it deals with a protagonist who is on the opposite side of racial differences—she wants *nothing* to do with her Puerto Rican heritage. This strikes me with awe as I have a hard time imagining why anyone would want to deny a part of who they are. Emily comes around to accepting and understanding her Caribbean heritage through learning the intricacies of dance and music. Ostow's novel is great way for biracial teens, particularly those of White and Hispanic descent, to see and understand culture differences, but that they can also embrace every culture that they consist of.

Peña, Matt de la. *We Were Here*. New York: Delacorte, 2009. Print.

Finding himself in trouble after a fatal accident and sent to live in a group home in San Jose, Ca, a Mexican teen named Miguel decides to keep to himself for the one-year-judge-ordered sentence but soon finds himself on the run with an illiterate Black teen named Rondell and a crazy Chinese teen named Mong. Travelling along the coast to reach Mexico, the three teenage boys learn about each other and themselves, while creating an unexpected friendship.

This novel explores the theme of friendship among teens of different races and backgrounds. This is a wonderful novel for troubled teens, both girls and boys, whom are in similar situations and can find some solace that they are not alone, and can also better their situations with a positive outlook on life. It is also a great starter novel for the reluctant reader with its easy diction and flowing plotline filled with flashbacks and Miguel's private thoughts.

Senna, Danzy. *Caucasia*. New York: Riverhead, 1999. Print.

Birdie and Cole are the daughters of a black father and a white mother, intellectuals and activists in the Civil Rights Movement in 1970s Boston. The sisters are so close that they have created a private language, yet to the outside world they can't be sisters: Birdie appears to be white, while Cole is dark enough to fit in with the other kids at the Afrocentric school they attend. For Birdie, Cole is the mirror in which she can see her own blackness. Then their parents' marriage falls apart. Their father's new black girlfriend won't even look at Birdie, while their mother gives her life over to the Movement: at night the sisters watch mysterious men arrive with bundles shaped like rifles. One night Birdie watches her father and his girlfriend drive away with Cole—they have gone to Brazil, she will later learn, where her father hopes for a racial equality he will never find in the States. The next morning—in the belief that the Feds are after them—Birdie and her mother leave everything behind: their house and possessions, their friends, and—most disturbing of all—their identity (*Caucasia*).

Senna's novel explores the hardships that a biracial family goes through—especially the two sisters whom look nothing like sisters because of their very visible skin color difference. Some of the major themes in the novel include racial discrimination, marriage, divorce, familial separation, emigration, and sibling bonding. This is a great novel to read for those whom come from a biracial family and are or have siblings that appear to be different races than each other, especially those whose families are no longer together.

Volponi, Paul. *Black and White*. New York: Speak, 2006. Print.

Inseparable on and off the basketball court, Marcus and Eddie are known as "Black" and "White"; stars of their high school basketball team and surefire picks for college scholarships. When Marcus is identified as an accomplice in a string of armed robberies, he is forced to re-evaluate his loyalty to his family and his partner in crime. Eddie is also arrested but the witnesses can't positively identify him as the gunman. He is preoccupied with saving his own neck and holding on to a scholarship offer from St. John's University. Eddie knows that Marcus is the only thing standing between him and serious jail time (*Black and White*).

Volponi's novel explores the injustices in the judicial system when it comes down to a person's race and skin color. The novel also shows the test of friendship and how strong families are when they are most needed. It is also very common nowadays for high school athletes to depend on securing a scholarship in order to go to college, which is seen through Eddie. This need to succeed creates a bridge YA readers and the novel's characters.

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