

# Enhancing Antiracist Teacher Education:

## Critical Witnessing through Pairing YA Literature and Adult Nonfiction

In this article, we borrow the term *critical witnessing* to describe our purposes for pairing multicultural young adult (YA) fiction with adult nonfiction in our antiracist work with preservice urban elementary teachers. Tiffany Ana López (2009) explains critical witnessing as the “process of being so moved or struck by the experience of encountering a text as to embrace a specific course of action avowedly intended to forge a path toward change” (p. 205).

The “specific course of action” we hoped to encourage in our work with preservice teachers was an understanding that racism isn’t random or innocent but intentionally structural and systemic—what race scholar Zeus Leonardo (2013) calls the “patterned and enduring . . . acts, decisions, and policies white subjects perpetrate on people of color” (pp. 137, 139). We believe this understanding is crucial to achieving social justice in public education, given that patterns such as disproportionate referrals of students of color in special education and advanced courses, disproportionate office referral and suspension rates among students of color, and an underrepresentation of students of color in schoolwide clubs, organizations, and other prestigious arenas go unnoticed by colorblind teachers, or teachers who claim post-racial ideologies (whether consciously or unconsciously) (Milner, 2010; Milner & Laughter, 2014).

As Solomon, Portelli, Daniel, and Campbell (2006) suggest, our [predominantly White] teacher education students are poised to “reproduce and transmit the racial order to the next generation” (p. 148) unless current understandings of race and racism

are disrupted. Ultimately, we wanted our students to learn about and consider the history and contemporaneity of racism in the US, examine their own racial identities, examine the ideologies with which they will enter future elementary classrooms, and “interrogate their personal investment in either challenging or maintaining the existing systems” of racism evidenced in public schooling (Solomon et al., 2006, p. 150).

To help our students begin to see racism as an “enduring” system of intentional “acts, decisions, and policies,” we carefully paired two young adult novels—Sharon Draper’s (2006) historical fiction YA novel, *Copper Sun*, and Walter Dean Myers’s (1999) contemporary realistic fiction YA novel, *Monster*—with excerpts from Michelle Alexander’s (2012) nonfiction work, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* in Chonika’s urban elementary education course.

### The Urban Education Course Context

Chonika is a Black woman who, prior to teaching at the college level, worked as an elementary school teacher in Title I schools that served students from low-income backgrounds. Susan is a White female who has taught secondary English/Language Arts in rural, suburban, and urban public school contexts. The urban education program we describe in this article is situated within the context of a larger teacher education program where White females make up the vast majority of the student body. Many of these students plan to work in majority White communities like the ones in which they were raised and received

their K–12 education. This mirrors national trends, as nearly 85 percent of US teachers are White, monolingual native English speakers, many of whom have had very little, if any, training in working with culturally and linguistically diverse learners; many of whom benefit from White privilege; and many of whom hold deficit-oriented beliefs toward young people of color (Glenn, 2012; 2013).

However, growing diversity in US schools disrupts the notion that the vast majority of public schools

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will remain White. Demographic shifts in K–12 schools prompt us to take a closer look at the skills these future teachers will need to be effective teachers in racially and culturally diverse schools and communities, but also urge us to consider how teacher training must change so that teachers are capable of preparing all students to function in a diverse and equitable world.

This article documents our experiences working with a subset of teacher

education students pursuing an elementary urban education concentration at a large public university in the Southeast United States. The urban education program follows a 3-semester cohort model where undergraduate students begin as pre-interns in the spring semester of their senior year. Upon completion of the spring semester, students graduate and are subsequently enrolled as Master’s students and teaching interns.

In the Master’s degree program, the interns attend classes for a full academic year and the summer sessions before and after that year. During the internship year that follows, they work in schools four days a week and attend classes one day per week. This article documents our experiences with the 2014 cohort during the first of three semesters in the urban teacher education program. At the time of this study, the urban education concentration was comprised of 21 female students, 19 of whom agreed to participate in the study on which this article is based. Two of the study participants were of Asian descent, one was

multiracial (Mexican and White); the remaining 16 students self-identified as White.

The course was co-taught by several instructors and covered content related to teaching methods, classroom management, and educational foundations. In addition to this course, students were also enrolled in courses that fulfilled requirements for their undergraduate degree programs. Outside of the class sessions we report on in this article, course instructors regularly engaged students in discussions and activities related to teaching in diverse contexts. The course met for three hours twice per week for fifteen weeks; however, the young adult literature (YAL) portion of the class met for eight consecutive classes over four weeks and was taught exclusively by us.

## **Revising Our Antiracist Pedagogy**

We are always striving to become more effective antiracist teacher educators. After teaching this class for several semesters, Chonika felt that although students were interested in urban education, they came to the field with limited knowledge of both historical and contemporary issues related to race and racism and their own racial identities and privilege. The students were committed to “saving” the children in poor communities of color but seemed unaware of how historical and structural discrimination created gaps in socioeconomic status and student achievement. Nor did the students seem to see themselves as intimately connected to “those” students—the racial, ethnic, and language minorities they served. These limited understandings can be problematic, as other antiracist educators and researchers have found that the inability to “examine the larger historical contexts that have attributed to and buttress the contemporary reification of injustices” can prevent teachers from understanding how racism and privilege continue as a system of oppression and domination today (Solomon et al., 2006, p. 158).

In the past, the course did not address YAL specifically and consisted of exploring theoretical models, such as multicultural education, critical pedagogy, critical race theory, antiracist education, and culturally responsive pedagogy. However, students had little understanding as to why these frameworks might prove useful in schools that serve children of color. We perceived these limitations in teacher education students’ understanding as major impediments to their potential

effectiveness as agents of change in urban schools.

Revisions to the sessions we co-taught evolved from a dialogue we had after Susan observed one of Chonika's class sessions the previous year. We discussed possibilities for teaching historical content and the relationship between structural racism and the lived realities of people of color in a way that could help our teacher education students develop empathy and learn information that could spark their interest in and commitment to antiracist teaching. As we thought about the kinds of media that could invoke such meaning for students, we decided on a curriculum framed to assist students in their burgeoning understandings of antiracist pedagogy. As Howard (2006) puts it, "[S]omething powerful has to happen to [White people] . . ." for them to begin to critically examine racialized oppression as well as their own Whiteness and privilege (p.17). We hoped that the addition of YAL, paired with engaging nonfiction, would serve as that "something powerful" for students who seemed to have not yet experienced a "critical witnessing" moment—an encounter with antiracist pedagogy that would spur further racial identity development and growth.

### **Pairing Multicultural YA Fiction with Nonfiction**

López (2009) explains that *critical witnessing* is experienced as a "profound level of response . . ." (p. 206). We wanted our students to experience a kind of response to the course readings that would positively engage them and help them remain open to exploring their own racial identities and the ways privilege is implicated in structural racism. We know from research by antiracist educators that White teacher candidates' responses to multicultural readings often assert notions of individualism and meritocracy ("Anyone can achieve their dreams if they work hard"); focus on personal feelings of discomfort and guilt ("I'm not a racist"), which can subvert a structural study of racism; and/or negate White privilege ("What about affirmative action?") (Leonardo, 2013; Levine-Rasky, 2000; Solomon et al., 2006; Trainor, 2005).

To try to discourage these kinds of responses, we turned to young adult literature. Susan is a long-time advocate of multicultural YA fiction and has worked to reposition this category of YA literature as central to

the teacher education curriculum for several important reasons. Multicultural YA fiction can provide a multiplicity of voices and perspectives that are typically absent in teacher preparation. In addition, multicultural YA fiction can be highly engaging for readers, as it brings diverse young people to life through rich characterization, authentic dialogue, and realistic portrayals of such classic YA themes as coming of age and the search for identity. Good multicultural YA fiction makes us care about and empathize with the young people we read about.

Multicultural YA fiction also provides self-affirmation for diverse readers while expanding all readers' worldviews. In the urban elementary course, we drew on Bishop's (1990) well-known metaphor of books as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors to encourage our preservice teachers to 1) consider what felt "familiar" and "strange" to them in *Copper Sun* and *Monster* (windows); 2) explore the ways they saw themselves "reflected" in the situations and characters in the novels (mirrors), and 3) consider how they could move beyond barriers to engage new people, places, and ideas (sliding glass doors).

Finally, we know multicultural YA fiction can provide some comfortable distance between readers and the potential "hot topics" of race and diversity the texts may offer. This comfortable distance can reduce some of the emotional risks often associated with conversations around race in the classroom (Glenn, 2006), which has been an important goal in Susan's work, as she has used multicultural YA fiction to help beginning teachers 1) learn how to take up issues of race and racism in the classroom, and 2) challenge and refine knowledge of and dispositions toward teaching students of color (see Groenke & Maples, 2009; Groenke, Maples, & Henderson, 2010; Groenke & Youngquist, 2011).

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But as we and other teacher educators who use multicultural YA fiction in preservice teacher education have begun to consider (see Groenke et al., in press), using YA fiction alone may be counterproductive to antiracist goals. As Glenn (2012, 2013) found in her work with preservice teachers, the use of multicultural YA fiction—Matt de la Peña’s *Mexican WhiteBoy*

(2008) and *We Were Here* (2009) and Jacqueline Woodson’s *After Tupac and D Foster* (2008)—did not disrupt the deficit perspectives toward youth of color that her students held, even as they gained new insights. Haddix & Price-Dennis (2013) also found that their use of urban “street fiction” with beginning teachers—Sapphire’s *Push* (1997) and Sister Souljah’s *The Coldest Winter Ever* (2006)—may have served to reify dominant stereotypes about youth of color (e.g., youth

of color are “non-literate”). These—like the responses described by other antiracist researchers—are not the powerful responses of critical witnessing that López describes.

Feeling this tension about the problematic use of YA fiction in antiracist teacher education; hoping to help preservice teachers begin to see the historical context of structural, systemic racism as connected to contemporary forms of racial oppression; and desiring powerful responses that inspire self-reflexivity and personal and social change, we decided to pair adult nonfiction with the multicultural YA fiction we use in our antiracist work with beginning urban elementary teachers. Award-winning personal essayist, Phillip Lopate (2013) suggests that while fiction “[gets] at the literary truth,” nonfiction “aims for both the literary and literal truth” (p. 186). We wondered if providing our students the engaging “literary truth” of YA fiction, paired with both the “literary and literal truth” of nonfiction, would encourage the kind of critical witnessing we hoped to see.

We also decided to use nonfiction because we are feeling the pressure of the Common Core Reading and Literacy Standards in our state, especially their emphasis on increased reading of nonfiction and informational texts across the school day. While we are aware of the controversy and debates surrounding the Standards, best practice in reading instruction, and definitions of “nonfiction,” we feel the new Standards provide an opportunity to model for teachers how nonfiction can be integrated with engaging YA fiction to meet instructional goals in the classroom. For all of these reasons, we paired Draper’s and Myers’s YA fictional novels with the first two chapters of Michelle Alexander’s nonfiction text, *The New Jim Crow*. We describe these texts in more detail below.

## Texts as Critical Witnesses

### Sharon Draper’s *Copper Sun*

López explains that critical witnessing “entails more than just telling . . . a story,” and instead “works from a story’s . . . intention . . . to spotlight the conditions that brought the story into being” (p. 206). Sharon Draper’s award-winning historical fiction YA novel, *Copper Sun*, spotlights the horrors of the African slave trade, as witnessed by 15-year-old Amari, who is brutally beaten, branded, and stolen from her African village and then sold into the slave trade. Amari survives the Middle Passage, only to be bought by a Southern plantation owner and given to a 16-year-old boy as a birthday present. On the plantation, Amari struggles to hold on to her memories and self-worth but finds strength and friendship in unexpected places. Ultimately, she escapes toward freedom and begins to heal.

Draper (2014) explains on the *Copper Sun* website that her own travels to Ghana inspired her to write the book. In Ghana, Draper visited the slave castles, and as a result, she “knew [she] had to tell the story of just one of those who had passed that way.” Draper further explains that she “speaks” for “all those who came before [her]—the untold multitudes of ancestors who needed a voice.”

López (2009) suggests that authors position themselves as critical witnesses when they “[share] stories of survival and healing” (p. 205). Draper explains that, ultimately, she presented the character of Amari as someone who

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undergoes the humiliations of slavery and who survives to pass off her history to the next generation. I think it's real important to remember the past and never forget those who came before us. It is our job to tell their stories. . . . Slavery is a topic that should not be ignored, but discussed and remembered. The generation that does not remember the evils of the past may be forced to repeat them.

We felt *Copper Sun* would be a powerful resource for our students to learn about various aspects of the institution of slavery, including the origins of the slave trade; the Middle Passage; beliefs about slaves (e.g., they are savages and animals) used to rationalize slavery; the processes of selling and buying slaves; slave working conditions and how slave labor (and slave knowledge of rice cultivation in Charleston, South Carolina) became the foundation for the Southern plantation economy; and even the horrors of rape and other physical torture and abuse experienced by female slaves. It is one thing to learn about this information through factual details and statistics, but we wanted to put a human face on the history of slavery. This is what fiction, or historical fiction, is especially good for—humanizing history, especially history that must be remembered. We also believed that Draper's novel would begin to set in place the understanding that our “[White] ancestors, using various tools of domination and oppression, have created a society in which their benefits and privileges have been amassed at the expense of other racial and ethnic groups” (Solomon et al., 2006, p. 154).

### **Walter Dean Myers's *Monster***

After reading *Copper Sun*, students then read Walter Dean Myers's *Monster*, which tells the contemporary story of Steve, a 16-year-old African American male on trial for being an assumed accomplice to involuntary manslaughter. Throughout the novel, Steve struggles to understand who he is and how he ended up on trial for his life. His lawyer tells him it's her job to make him look “human” in the eyes of the jury. When the judge, his lawyer, and jury members look at Steve, they see someone to fear—a sub-human, a thug, a “monster,” and someone expendable. Steve struggles throughout the book to come to terms with this and prove to the jury and readers that he is a “good person.”

We wanted students to make connections between the history of slavery and Steve's contemporary struggle to be seen as human first, and African American and male second. We also believed *Monster* would

begin to help students see how racism is institutionalized in systems like the juvenile justice system. As Willis and Parker (2009) explain, “The novel grapples with the larger issue of Steve's attempts to proclaim his innocence within a system that has no interest in that innocence and instead trades heavily in racist perceptions of him (and his fellow inmates) as guilty before his trial begins” (p. 42). Willis and Parker, who apply critical race theory to the novel when using it with preservice English teachers, note further:

It should be deeply troubling [to readers] that the judge, attorneys, and most of the jurors are White, while Steve and the other men convicted of the murder are men of color; a fact that must be acknowledged and addressed when teaching this book. The lack of seriousness displayed by the judge and attorney . . . and Steve's attorney's desire for him to concentrate on presenting himself as innocent are equally disturbing. In addition, Steve's experience inside the detention center speaks to the larger condition of incarceration as dehumanizing. (p. 45)

Again, we thought putting a young, human face on the issue of institutionalized racism would help our students come to care about Steve and motivate their engagement with the hard questions of Steve's guilt as “implicated by his Blackness” (Willis & Parker, p. 43).

Writing in 1982, Rudine Sims (Bishop) was the first to suggest that Walter Dean Myers might be a critical witness, calling him a “writer-witness,” an author whose books have attempted to “change the world, at least the all-white world of children's books, by creating truer images of Afro-Americans and by increasing their visibility” (p. 79). Indeed, in books like *Monster*, Myers creates a “true image”—complex as it is—of the ongoing, contemporary African American struggle to be viewed as human. Myers also bears witness in *Monster* to the fact that race continues to matter in how children of color are perceived in society and that young Black males, especially, are guilty of being Black until proven innocent.

### **Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow***

Finally, students read the first two chapters of Michelle Alexander's book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2012). A long-time civil rights activist and litigator, Alexander argues vehemently that, contrary to popular beliefs that we now live in a post-racial society, a racial caste system still prevails in America in the form of mass incarceration. Like its Jim Crow predecessor, mass

incarceration (the “new” Jim Crow) is today’s racist system of social control. As Alexander explains in the book, more African Americans are under correctional control today than were enslaved in 1850, and the effects have been devastating to communities of color.

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The first chapter in Alexander’s book sketches the history of “racialized social control” in America through a caste system based mostly on race. Alexander explains that this caste-based system has existed in three different forms: slavery, Jim Crow, and mass incarceration. Alexander details how each of these forms was brought about deliberately and

how, in its latest form of mass incarceration, the caste system continues to achieve its aims of segregation.

The second chapter delineates the history of the “War on Drugs” and fleshes out the processes by which the “War on Drugs” in the 1980s was used to legitimize incarceration of people of color. The chapter also highlights the role of the US Supreme Court in “immunizing” structural racism from legal challenge by dismantling the protections of the 4th Amendment. The chapter also makes the point that mass incarceration as the “new” Jim Crow depends upon its victims being burdened with the prison label, which stays with former inmates who are discriminated against, legally, for the rest of their lives, and who are thus denied employment, housing, education, and public benefits.

When asked why she decided to write *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander explains:

I began to awaken to the reality that our criminal justice system now functions much more like a system of racial or social control than a system of crime prevention and control. I wanted to share with others the facts, history [and] stories that I wish that I had known long before in the hopes that others would begin to have the same kind of awakening and commit themselves to building a movement to end mass incarceration in America. (Christian, 2014, p. 32)

We felt that ending with Alexander’s chapters might help students to make clear connections

between Amari’s historical account of slavery and Steve’s contemporary account of his life as a Black boy growing up in a challenging neighborhood to understand how the same institutionalized structures continue to dehumanize and oppress people of color. We hoped that the “literal truth” presented in Alexander’s chapters would resonate with the “literary truths” found in the fictional YA novels our students read. Together, these pieces were used to demonstrate the interconnectedness of interpersonal experiences and larger systemic issues. Students read the YA novels in small-group literature circles and the Alexander chapters in larger jigsawed groups, which we describe in more detail below.

### **Facilitating Discussion about Race and Racism**

We modified Harvey Daniels’s (2002) model of small-group book clubs, or literature circles, to facilitate student discussion about the books. Daniels’s model encourages student choice in text selections, but as we describe above, we had very specific instructional goals in mind that delimited the choices to the three texts we had selected. While in the future we intend to include more texts by other authors of color in our instruction, we focused on texts by African American authors because of our country’s long legacy of slavery of African American peoples, which contributed to America’s economic and geopolitical power, and because Black/White relations have historically been, and continue to be, contentious, as witnessed most recently in Ferguson, Missouri.

Daniels advises that literature circles be kept small, ideally 3–4 students. We had five total literature circles, with four groups consisting of four students and one group consisting of five students. Students were randomly assigned to groups by counting off. In most cases, this meant students were separated from their friends in the class, whom they usually sat beside, and instead were challenged to engage with different ideas and orientations.

Daniels explains that literature circle *roles* can act as “book club training wheels” to help structure the group activity, and describes the four “basic” roles that can be used to structure the small-group literature discussion (i.e., connector, questioner, literary luminary, and illustrator). Because we wanted to keep

the focus of students' readings and discussion on developing understandings about the historical context of racism in the US, we had multiple students in each group take on different connector roles with *Copper Sun*, as well as an illustrator role and an additional role of "travel tracer." We posed history-based questions for the connector roles, which required students to research the slave trade, the Middle Passage, rice cultivation in the South, work conditions for slaves on southern plantations, Fort Mose, White slave owners' rationalization of slavery, rape/miscegenation, and abolition.

For *Monster*, questions posed for the connector roles required students to research current statistics on youth of color in juvenile detention centers, Malcolm X and Marcus Garvey (the names of a boulevard and park mentioned in *Monster*), and lynching (the judge tells Steve at one point, "We don't drag people out of their beds in the middle of the night and lynch them" [p. 26]). The groups met three times to discuss *Copper Sun* and share role activities, and three times to discuss *Monster*. The groups met for an hour during each class meeting. Students switched roles for each group meeting.

For the Alexander chapters, we used larger, modified jigsawed groups, primarily because we wanted the students to experience another type of reading/discussion activity. Jigsaw is a cooperative learning strategy that enables each student of a "home" group to specialize in one aspect of a topic. Students meet with members from other groups who are assigned the same aspect and, after mastering the material, return to the "home" group and teach the material to their group members. With this strategy, each student in the "home" group serves as a piece of the topic's puzzle; when they work together as a whole, they create the complete jigsaw puzzle. The strategy is known for aiding comprehension and helping to improve listening and communication skills (Jigsaw, 2014).

For our purposes, we had the entire class read the "Introduction" in Alexander's book. Then we split the class into two "home" groups, having them count off 1-2 in each group. All of the 1s in each "home" group were assigned to read and discuss Ch. 1 in Alexander's book in an "expert" group. All of the 2s were assigned to read and discuss Ch. 2 in Alexander's book in an "expert" group. Then students returned to

their home groups to describe and summarize their chapters and share insights gained and connections made to other course readings, including the young adult texts.

Students also wrote weekly journal reflections about the readings, using Bishop's "windows," "mirrors," and "sliding glass doors" metaphor as a response frame. While our future research agenda includes analyzing the preservice teachers' understandings of the YA fiction, nonfiction, and their own racial identities through Bishop's lenses and the discussion activities, for the purposes of this article, we focus on the students' responses to the use of the YAL and nonfiction readings as course texts.

Once the literature circle and jigsaw discussions were completed, we asked students to respond to the following questions in their final journal entry: What do you think about the use of the readings of YA fiction and nonfiction in this class? What do you see as connections between the YA fiction and the nonfiction we read in this course? One response per research participant was analyzed, for a total of 19 responses.

The following questions guided our analysis of the journal responses: What kind of response did the pairing of YA fiction and adult nonfiction provoke? What did the students write about? What, if any, impact did the pairing of the YA fiction with the nonfiction have on students' understandings of their own personal identities, institutionalized racism, and antiracist teaching? We read and reread the journal entries multiple times and looked for general themes and patterns in the data. Four themes that emerged from the data were: 1) empathetic readings; 2) awareness (and burgeoning ownership of) White privilege; 3) awareness of connections between racism and Discourse (the power to name); and 4) tensions around implications for future teaching. We discuss these in more detail below.

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## Improving Our Practice: What We Learned

### Impact of the Multicultural YA Fiction

Through this work, it became evident that both the fiction and nonfiction texts served as critical witnesses to our preservice teachers, but in different ways.

Students repeatedly expressed that the shift from traditional academic readings to multicultural YA fiction in a college course had the most profound impact on their understanding of slavery and discrimination, but more important, the YA fiction evoked empathy for the characters in the story and promoted a desire to work toward social change. One student documented how the books served as a critical witness for her, stating:

Reading *Copper Sun* and *Monster* made these injustices more real. . . . When I read a story written in first person about a person who experienced these travesties, I have a strong emotional reaction. . . . It's easy to get bogged down by numbers and statistics, but when you're faced with someone who actually experiences injustice, it's hard to turn away.

The very notion that engaging in the YA fiction made it “hard to turn away” speaks to the power of the literature to move preservice teachers to action. Another student remarked, “The young adult novels had a greater effect on me emotionally because I felt like I was experiencing these injustices with the characters.”

In addition, for the preservice teachers in the class, the multicultural YA fiction provided a new or sometimes renewed sense of commitment to address injustices through their teaching. This was the kind of connection that appeared to be missing for previous cohorts of students. Racial identity development (Helms, 1990) is often prompted by an initial encounter that makes a person aware of his/her race. For students with limited possibilities to experience such encounters, multicultural YA fiction seemed to be the catalyst they needed to be moved to action. The multicultural YA fiction helped the preservice teachers to “experience injustice” from the perspective of marginalized individuals.

### Impact of the Paired Reading of Fiction and Nonfiction

While the multicultural YA fiction seemed to provoke an empathic response, the combination of the YA fiction with the nonfiction readings led to new insights for many of the students, especially about White privi-

lege. We think this occurred because the preservice teachers came to see White privilege at work in their lives simply by understanding how they were exempt from the experiences shared by Draper, Myers, and Alexander. White privilege, or White racial hegemony, can be defined as the advantages—the social capital and material benefits—that White people “accrue simply by virtue of being constructed as white” (Leonardo, 2013, p. 137). As Rothenberg (2012) explains, “White privilege is the other side of racism. Unless we name it, we are in danger of wallowing in guilt or moral outrage with no idea of how to move beyond them” (p. 1).

Like many other antiracist educators, we used Peggy McIntosh's (1990) seminal article “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” early in the course to help students understand the concept of and “name” White privilege and its connections to systemic, structural racism, but our recollections of class discussion about the article are that students were quiet and seemingly “emotionally paralyzed” by the information, similar to the White teacher candidates in Solomon et al.'s 2006 study.

But by the end of the course, after having read the young adult novels and the Alexander chapters, several students seemed to recognize White privilege, and even their own Whiteness. As Mary (student names are pseudonyms) wrote:

Learning about the statistics of race in the court systems helped me realize the advantage I have in the system. Even though I did not ask for the advantage, I would have a better chance of winning a case because of the . . . skin I was born into. It was not until reading these books, learning about the statistics, and looking at the Alexander chapters that I began to really see the disadvantage young men of color face. In the back of my mind I had always been made aware of these facts, but until this class they were simply facts. Reading in this class helped me put faces to the young men facing disadvantages in the legal system which made the topic become a reality for me.

Jillian also gained similar insights:

Both the novels and the [Alexander chapters] bring out that being White gets you out of a lot of the things. . . . In trial, White people will receive a lesser sentence. White people are less likely to be suspected and accused of a crime in the first place. White people are also more likely to hold power over others, even when not in a position of power.

Some students also began to connect White privilege to White supremacy and to acknowledge that the ra-

cial caste system Alexander describes still exists today. Samantha wrote in her journal:

The overall issue and theme in all of our readings, including *Monster*, *Copper Sun*, and *The New Jim Crow*, seems to come down to the issue of present-day slavery in our country. No, slavery for the most part does not exist in the same form that we saw in *Copper Sun*. However, it has simply altered in form. To me, the disparity in incarceration that we see present in *Monster* and the excerpts from *The New Jim Crow* is simply an alternate form of slavery to promote and sustain white supremacy.

The combination of the fiction and nonfiction readings also seemed to help the students see how the perpetuation of stereotypical, negative discourses about people of color—from the description of slaves as animals and savages in *Copper Sun* to the title of “monster” that Steve tries to resist—helps to maintain a racial caste system. Tara wrote in her journal, “All of these readings . . . point out the ideas of Black people being savages or monsters or lower than others. The term ‘thug’ is a modern day way of saying this about people of color. It’s never really gone away, the words have just changed.” Similarly, Carrie wrote: “The word ‘savage’ used in *Copper Sun* can be interchanged with the word ‘monster’ in *Monster* and the common word ‘thug’ used today. All of these terms exist as ways to dehumanize and vilify the black race, thus instilling unnecessary fear in whites.” Mary echoed these ideas in her journal:

In Michelle Alexander’s book as well as *Copper Sun* and *Monster*, there are clear discriminatory labels placed on people of color. In Alexander’s nonfiction reading, black people are automatically labeled as criminals, threats, and the “source of the problem.” In *Copper Sun*, black people are labeled as savage, slaves, and property. In *Monster*, black people are labeled as trouble makers, criminals, and monsters. But through all three, the problem is clear. Because of skin color, people of color have been viewed in a negative manner pushing injustice and inequality in a variety of settings throughout history.

Finally, the paired reading of the YA fiction and nonfiction helped some students see racism as a “bigger system.” Karen wrote: “In reading *Monster*, the reader can sympathize with Steve, but we may not be able to see how Steve plays a role in a bigger system where people of color are criminalized and imprisoned for the profit of others. Michelle Alexander’s book may be less of a page-turner than *Monster*, but the

ideas she suggests helped me to better understand the scale of the issue.”

Ultimately, the preservice teachers seemed to think the YA fiction paired with the nonfiction was beneficial to their learning.

As Mary wrote in her

journal, “One without the other would not

have produced the same results for me. In combi-

nation, they opened my eyes wider to the sub-

jects discussed than one could have done on its

own.” Jillian had similar sentiments, as expressed

in her journal: “Reading the YAL alongside Alexander’s academic piece gave

a multifaceted and therefore more complete picture of modern day racism. Had we only read *Monster*, I

may be able to dismiss his case as a ‘one-time’ deal or had I only read Alexander’s piece, I wouldn’t attach a

personal emotional meaning.”

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**Ultimately, the preservice teachers seemed to think the YA fiction paired with the nonfiction was beneficial to their learning.**

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## Can I Get a Witness?

As we had hoped, teacher education students’ opportunities to read the YA novels *Copper Sun* and *Monster* in an urban elementary education course helped them to see themselves in relation to the marginalized other. The *New Jim Crow* furthered this endeavor by demonstrating how current inequities are linked to systemic and historical oppression. The pairing of multicultural YA fiction and adult nonfiction enhanced the extent to which the readings served as critical witnesses to preservice teachers.

Ultimately, through the readings, students were exposed to complex ideas—not as obscure theoretical frameworks, but through the experiences of individuals, which opened up possibilities for understanding difficult concepts. We feel that as a result of the paired readings, many students were able to come to these understandings on their own. Some students even experienced the nuances inherent in race, class, and gender intersectionality. However, students seemed moved most by the empathy they developed for the characters in the YA fiction. For the preservice teachers, their view of minorities as mere victims of

discrimination was transformed as they began to see these individuals as fully human. It is through these connections that critical witnessing occurred.

## Where Do We Go From Here?

For students who had already solidified their commitment to antiracist teaching, the paired readings made them think more critically about what they would teach once they were in their own classrooms. Penelope shared:

I appreciated reading the young adult novels because I often struggle to find viable materials to use with students that deal with the topics that our history textbooks leave out . . . *Monster* . . . showed me a new way to look at teaching materials for my future students. . . . I can see a lot of ways that *Monster* could be used to help kids build an understanding of how justice is racialized in America (just as Alexander points out with her chapter titled “The Color of Justice”). I can definitely imagine myself using this book in a variety of ways—to talk about the criminal justice system, police brutality, contemporary issues, as well as to open kids’ eyes to the structural injustices present in our society.

Rather than a response of empathy and commitment to social justice, students like Penelope who had already solidified that commitment gave more thought to how they would engage their students with texts that could, in turn, provoke a powerful response. This movement toward emancipatory teaching practices that promote engagement, teach students to “read the world,” understand injustice, and work toward change is our larger goal.

As we continue to work with this cohort, we grapple with ways to build on what they learned during the pre-intern semester. Their engagement with YAL only sparked the beginning of the racial identity development process for many students, and while they reported a new or sometimes renewed commitment to social justice, we were unsure as to whether some of these gains would be lost over the summer months when most students could readily disengage from issues of equity.

As students entered the first semester of their internship year, we shared with them accounts of violence and unjust acts committed against people of color over the summer months. Media accounts of the killing of unarmed Black men like Michael Brown and Eric Garner by police and the arrest of Charles Belk

served as reminders of why a commitment to antiracist teaching is necessary for Whites *and* students of color.

But even with exposure to such incidents, we recognize that some students actively resist the notion that racism is endemic and are not quite sure why this matters to them or how it can or should be connected to teaching. When asked in anonymous class evaluations what contributed most to their learning, one student stated, “It depends on what you want to call ‘learning.’ I think I’ve ‘learned’ a lot but I don’t think that [we learned] anything about teaching.” Still, there were students who thought the course was “amazing” and that it “stretched their thinking.” There are students who are thinking critically about what is happening in the schools where they serve as interns. Penelope, in particular, has noticed disparities in how students are disciplined based on race and is thinking about how to engage in more productive and equitable classroom management strategies.

As the students in the 2014 cohort continue on their trajectory through the program, they will engage in community mapping activities and action research projects and engage frameworks that envision pedagogy and practice. We continue to think through the myriad ways our students could translate what they have learned into classroom practice and social justice advocacy in contexts both in and out of the classroom. Our success with YAL as a tool for inciting interests and commitment to antiracist teaching is only the first step in what we hope will be a lifetime of learning and renewed commitment to social justice.

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