

Forging Global Perspectives through Post-colonial Young Adult Literature

In reading the call for this issue of *The ALAN Review*, one question in particular stood out to me: “What will our future roles as young adult literature advocates be and with whom should we be forging relationships?” As a former high school English teacher who taught World Literature, and in my recent work with preservice English teachers, my goal has consistently been to locate texts that not only engage my students and are relevant to their lives, but also invite them to consider the lives of young people (un)like themselves living in other parts of the world. I am particularly interested in the pedagogical possibilities of novels that feature young protagonists of color living outside of the cultural context of the US. However, it has been challenging to find such texts because they are underrepresented in the international young adult literature market—the collection of young adult books published in other countries that are then imported or republished in the US. (i.e., the Harry Potter series).

In a recent survey of winning and honor titles of the Printz Award for Excellence in Young Adult Literature over the last ten years, Cart (2010) counted a high number of international novels. However, he pointed out that these texts were primarily from Europe and Australia, and the stories that featured characters of color were all set in US. multicultural contexts. In a similar study, Koss and Teale (2009) reviewed bestsellers, teen lists, and award-winning young adult novels from 1999 to 2005 to determine the types of young adult novels that are published and that adolescents read the most. The authors determined that, while the number of stories with inter-

national settings was higher than they expected, the novels were “culturally generic with the characters’ ethnicity used only for descriptive purposes rather than functioning to depict insights about the culture or cultural practice” (p. 566). Like Cart (2010), Koss and Teale (2009) found that “the majority of international countries and characters portrayed were white and European” (p. 569). The authors conclude that,

The lack of cultural diversity in YA literature indicates that educators will need to make special efforts to seek out and use quality books that include diverse characters, and that publishers should increase their efforts to make available YA books that include multicultural characters and discuss issues related to race and diversity in significant ways. (p. 570)

Thus, I propose one way educators might forge ahead in the field of young adult literature is to advocate for literature that features diversity in international contexts. In this article, I focus on the possibilities, challenges, and potential pedagogical applications of post-colonial young adult literature.

Defining Post-colonial Young Adult Literature

I use the term “post-colonial” to refer to the literary theory and body of literature that focuses on the experiences of nations colonized by Britain, France, Portugal, Spain, and the Netherlands (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2002). The literature that has emerged in response to colonialism represents numerous countries from various regions of the world, such as the Americas, the African continent, and South Asia.

Post-colonial young adult literature features stories written for and about young adults coming of age during the time of colonization and afterwards.

Although colonialism was carried out differently in these regions, they share a certain tension with and assertion of difference from the imperial worldview (Ashcroft et al., 2002). For instance, a central concern of post-colonial theory and literature is to interrogate

the relationship between the colonized and the colonizer (see Memmi, 1957/1991). McGillis (2000) explains, “The colonial mentality assumes that the colonizer represents a more advanced state of civilization than the colonized does, and therefore that the colonizer has a right to assume a position of dominance” (p. xxii). Post-colonial authors challenge this perspective and explore the ramifications such a worldview has had on groups of people

around the world during colonialism and afterwards. Post-colonial young adult literature explores similar events from the perspective of adolescents.

Locating post-colonial young adult texts can pose some challenges because they are not categorized as “post-colonial,” but rather tend to fall under the more generalized labels of “multicultural,” “global,” or “international.” While multicultural texts do include the experiences of immigrants of color from post-colonial nations, these stories often focus on the immigrant’s experience of adjusting to or assimilating into western culture, whether in Europe, North America, or Australia. Such insights are certainly important for readers to have. However, post-colonial texts merit special consideration because they are culturally and historically specific. In other words, post-colonial narratives offer a view of the world beyond a western cultural context because they feature characters that tell stories from within the purview of their own national contexts and invoke a colonial history that has shaped and continues to inform the sociocultural, economic, and political contexts of the geographical locations where the characters are located.

In my own search for post-colonial young adult literature, I have devised five characteristics that might serve as guidelines for other educators in their efforts to identify and select post-colonial young adult literature:

- Post-colonial young adult literature features stories written for and about young adults coming of age during the time of colonization and afterwards, and explores the ways in which characters navigate the geographical, cultural, social, economic, and political landscapes at play in that particular culture and time period.
- Post-colonial narratives are produced by authors who are members of the group depicted, in consideration of the colonial gaze that has characterized so many harmful representations of post-colonial subjects (Fanon, 1952/1967) and in support of these authors’ attempts to represent their cultures from their own insider perspectives.
- Post-colonial narratives are culturally specific and feature an unselfconscious use of local languages and/or dialects.
- Post-colonial narratives are often based on actual events and run across several genres, such as historical or contemporary fiction, fantasy, science fiction, and nonfiction (including memoir and autobiography).
- Post-colonial themes in these young adult texts mirror those explored in post-colonial theory, including identity—race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality—hybridity, agency, the relationship between colonizer/colonized, among others (Ashcroft et al., 2002; McGillis, 2000).

This brief background serves as an introduction to the genre of post-colonial young adult literature, one that certainly raises more questions than answers about how to categorize these works.

Identity in Post-colonial Young Adult Literature

One theme that post-colonial young adult literature and traditional young adult literature have in common is that of identity. Young adult literature recognizes adolescence as a unique moment in life with its own distinct challenges—that of growing up, marked by a search for identity and a need to belong (Cart, 2008). Post-colonial young adult literature addresses these challenges in a unique context: growing up during or after colonization. This context brings additional complications for young adults whose identities and the choices they can make are shaped and constrained by the social, cultural, political, and historical contexts of

the countries where the stories take place. As coming of age narratives, I believe these stories are relevant to young people in the US because they offer some familiar experiences and challenges about growing up, while also presenting readers the opportunity to engage cultures beyond their own and consider a different worldview. In addition, in invoking a colonial history and its aftermath, post-colonial young adult texts raise challenging questions about the current state of the world, which can in turn provide an opportunity for students to learn through inquiry and have generative discussions in the English classroom.

For the purposes of this article, I have selected three novels as exemplars of post-colonial young adult literature: the historical fiction novel *Climbing the Stairs* (Venkatraman, 2008), the historical fiction and graphic novel *Aya* (Aboutet & Oubrierie, 2007), and the contemporary realistic fiction novel *Now Is the Time for Running* (Williams, 2011). Additional texts educators might consider are included in an annotated bibliography at the end of this article. While these texts do not explore all of the concerns of post-colonial theory, the stories are rich and intricately weave many themes in the experiences and perspectives of young adults. The narratives successfully represent the complex ways in which social, cultural, and political issues intersect in the characters' lives.

I chose these novels for stories that feature a variety of historical eras, geographical locations, periods of young adulthood, and adolescent issues that secondary students will find engaging. In the following sections, I analyze each novel in terms of the theme of identity and discuss how the authors address and represent post-colonial issues from the perspective of an adolescent coming of age in post-colonial times. At the end of each section, I discuss some pedagogical considerations for using these novels with students. Together, these three stories paint a compelling picture of young people's lives in the (post)colonial past and present and provide opportunities for students and teachers to engage a variety of cultures and contexts.

Gender and Intersectionality in *Climbing the Stairs*

The Young Adult Library Association (YALSA) named *Climbing the Stairs* (Venkatraman, 2008) the 2009 Best Book for Young Adults. The story centers on Vidya, a

15-year-old girl coming of age in India in the 1940s, a time of tremendous social and political change. This historical fiction provides a different perspective on a well-known global event in history—World War II. The author reveals that Indians made up the largest volunteer army to fight alongside the British while they simultaneously struggled to gain their independence from Britain through the non-violent movement led by Mahatma Gandhi. Against this historical background, readers learn about the lives of Indian women in a patriarchal society through Vidya, as she attempts to resist and negotiate traditional gender norms. As a female, Vidya is expected to accept being in an arranged marriage and to cease her education once she becomes a wife and mother. Instead, Vidya dreams of going to college.

Feminist concerns run strongly throughout the narrative, as much of the novel takes place indoors and focuses on the daily lives of women. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2006) explain that:

In many different societies, women, like colonized subjects, have been relegated to the position of "Other," "colonized" by various forms of patriarchal domination. They thus share with colonized races and cultures an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression . . . Feminist and post-colonial discourse both seek to reinstate the marginalized in the face of the dominant. (p. 233)

In this way, the story explores the marginalized status of women in a patriarchal society at the end of the colonial period in India. The narrative begins with Vidya as both an insider and outsider in her own nuclear family because of her gender. Her father is somewhat progressive and makes allowances that contradict her mother's more traditional and conservative ideas of what girls can and cannot do. However, when Vidya's father is severely injured in a peace protest and can no longer provide for his family, her mother finds herself suddenly helpless and follows the tradition that says she must live with her husband's family. Vidya realizes that there are no other alternatives for her mother because "[a]ll her life, she had been trained to be a

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housewife. She had no education. She wasn't qualified for any kind of job" (p. 60).

Vidya, her mother, and older brother move to her grandfather's house, where her uncle, aunts, and cousins also live. In contrast to her upbringing, Vidya's extended family observes strict traditional

customs along gender lines. In her grandfather's house, even space is gendered: "the men lived upstairs and the women lived downstairs in that house" (p. 21). Vidya goes from having her own room and her own bed to living in the women's quarters in the "downstairs" portion of the house, where

she sleeps on a mat on the floor and finds her days arranged around cleaning, cooking, babysitting, and serving the men their meals. Readers follow Vidya as she negotiates the sociocultural limits placed on her because of her gender.

In addition to voicing gender issues in this novel, Venkatraman illustrates how identity categories such as gender, class, race, and nationality intersect in complex ways. In doing so, the author complicates any simple dichotomy of oppressor/oppressed by showing how oppression takes multiple forms, including colonization, racism, classism, and sexism. For instance, Vidya's family belongs to the Brahmin caste, an elite social status, which Vidya explains "wasn't meant to be hereditary or exclusive or hierarchical, but Brahmins and other "high" castes now oppressed those without education or wealth" (p. 8). However, having this measure of power over those less fortunate does little to protect Vidya's father from racist attacks by the British or Vidya from experiencing sexism in her grandfather's affluent, but conservative household. Her uncle once tells her approvingly, "Ah, Vidya, you've learned to be silent at last. Maybe we'll find you a husband despite your tanned complexion" (p. 34). He reveals both his expectation that, as a girl, she should be submissive and also the extent of his internalized racist beliefs that lighter skin color is more desirable. In weaving these categories, the author presents a view of India that is not only heterogeneous, but also makes a strong case for the ways

in which race, class, and gender constantly intertwine and complicate fixed notions of identity.

While my analysis focused on post-colonial themes in the novel, namely gender issues and the intersectionality of identities—the contradictions of Vidya's experiencing both sexism and socioeconomic privilege—there are multiple pedagogical approaches to this young adult novel. Students and teachers could certainly discuss the post-colonial elements of the story and reflect on the slippery, overlapping, and often conflicting nature of their own identities. Educators could also focus on the historical aspects of the story, which presents a perspective on World War II that is not typically addressed in social studies or literature courses and serves as a reminder that issues of colonialism extended well into the second half of the twentieth century. The novel also lends itself well to a study of culture and language as the author weaves Hindu beliefs and practices as well as many Hindi words into the narrative.

Counternarrative and Hybridity in *Aya*

Aya (Abouet & Oubrerie, 2007) is the first book in a series of three graphic novels about the adventures of teenage girls living in Côte d'Ivoire during the country's prosperous years in the 1970s. *Aya* won the 2006 award for Best First Album at the Angoulême International Comics Festival. Translated from French, the story is loosely based on Abouet's own childhood memories of Côte d'Ivoire. The light and humorous narrative follows *Aya* and her friends Adjoua and Bintou as they go out dancing and flirt with boys. *Aya* is the studious and responsible one who intends to go to medical school. Adjoua and Bintou are carefree and more interested in securing a good boyfriend than a career. The adolescent drama heightens when Adjoua gets pregnant and has to marry quickly.

Through its colorful illustrations and its humorous treatment of young adulthood, the author intended for *Aya* to function as a counternarrative. The novel portrays a vibrant and flourishing time in Côte d'Ivoire's past, in contrast to news media images of various countries in the African continent ravaged by poverty and disease. In the preface to the novel, Chase (2007) provides cultural, economic, and political background information on Côte d'Ivoire and indicates that, by depicting the country during a time of prosperity, *Aya* offers a narrative that belies "the news channels'

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unremittingly tragic narratives and unsettling images” of “swollen bellied children, machete wielding janja-weeds, and too many men and women dying of AIDS . . . that dominate the Western media” (para. 1–2). In this sense, the visual component of the graphic novel can help readers imagine Côte d’Ivoire in a different way than the African region is often represented.

In addition to functioning as a counter-narrative, *Aya* reveals both in images and text the cultural hybridity of the nation after colonization. Throughout the narrative, there is evidence of the continued cultural influence from France, which had colonized Côte d’Ivoire until 1960, as well as the newer influence of US popular culture in the seventies. For example, in one scene, Aya and her family are invited to have dinner at the house of her father’s employer, the owner of a brewery. Upon entering the gated mansion, Aya’s mother expresses admiration for the beautiful home, and the hostess shares that “[t]he furniture is from Paris” (p. 31). The owner of the brewery casually mentions that he knows the president of Côte d’Ivoire, who had him over recently and is “in Paris right now, meeting with president Giscard D’Estaing” (p. 31). Another vignette shows a woman describing a “Catherine Deneuve dress” she wants her tailor to reproduce for a wedding she is attending (p. 88).

Readers can also note the global reach of US American popular culture in seventies Côte d’Ivoire: the characters refer to the shows *Dallas* and *The Six Million Dollar Man*, and in an illustration of an outdoor disco—people dancing, music notes floating in the air, and a text bubble indicating music blaring from a loudspeaker—there is a man wearing the same white suit as John Travolta in the film *Saturday Night Fever* (p. 8). These scenes are juxtaposed with the local customs and fashions. For instance, Aya’s mother is a healer and the first person Adjoua goes to see when she feels ill; the girls wear European-style clothing as well as the *pagne*—the fabric wrap that can be worn as a skirt or dress. The narrative also indicates that there is a tension between socio-economic classes and that the more affluent individuals, such as the owner of the brewery, are not only able to afford French products, but they also use their cachet to enhance their social standing. Thus the novel complicates any singular representation of the African continent by including images and scenarios that illustrate the cultural hybridity of Côte d’Ivoire after independence.

The educational potential of *Aya* is that, as a graphic novel, it offers a visual component that is typically absent in print novels. When readers engage their imagination to construct for themselves the world about which they read, they draw images from a visual library built on their own experiences.

Graphic novels provide visual representations of culture through illustrations of objects and landscapes particular to a geographic region that readers might not have otherwise imagined for themselves. Of course, educators should always invite students to critically examine cultural representations, whether print or visual. For instance, in the case of *Aya*, the biographical information on the illustrator states that Oubrerie was born in Paris and travels frequently to Côte d’Ivoire. The fact that the illustrator had firsthand experiences in Côte d’Ivoire lends his illustrations a sense of accuracy. However, it is not clear whether or not the author and illustrator collaborated over the art or how faithful the novel is to Aboutet’s childhood memories. Nevertheless, *Aya* presents an opportunity for teachers to engage their students in literacy practices that include not only examining printed words, but also analyzing the illustrations as artwork and cultural representations that complement the narrative.

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Xenophobia in Now Is the Time for Running

Now Is the Time for Running (Williams, 2011), one of YALSA’s 2012 Best Fiction for Young Adults winners, is based on actual events. In May 2008 in South Africa, xenophobic riots targeted tens of thousands of migrants and refugees, many of whom were from Zimbabwe and seeking asylum in South Africa. A number of international newspapers covered the story as several of those refugees were killed in these attacks (Underhill & Khumalo, 2010).

One particularly graphic image was widely circulated as representing the extent of violence in the riots—a man set on fire. In the postscript of the book, Williams explains that he was moved by these

incidents and his own conversations with displaced and homeless Zimbabwean youth and decided to weave them into the novel, which is set in the first decade of the new millennium. This novel deviates slightly from the criteria I devised at the beginning of this essay, namely that the author should be an insider to the culture represented. Although the author of this novel is South African and the main character, Deo, is a 15-year-old boy from Zimbabwe, the narrative revolves around the xenophobic constructions of immigrants in South Africa and their consequences, to which Williams bears witness.

This . . . narrative of xenophobia provides readers with a realistic account of the current social, political, and economic issues at play in post-colonial Zimbabwe and South Africa.

In the opening chapters of the novel, Deo witnesses the decimation of his hometown of Gutu, Zimbabwe, by soldiers who accuse the villagers of opposing the current president's reelection. Deo and his older brother Innocent narrowly escape the attack and make their way to the border, where they cross illegally into South Africa in search of their father. Deo is resilient because he has to take care of Innocent, who has a disability that remains unnamed throughout the

story. Through the brothers' journey, readers get a current portrait of Zimbabwe and South Africa—two countries in the “aftermath of colonialism” (Hickling-Hudson, Matthews, & Woods, 2004, p. 3).

In contemporary post-colonial Zimbabwe, there is a food shortage, a totalitarian government, military oppression, and hyperinflation. The author includes several accounts of Zimbabwe's unstable economy. In one scene, for example, a character remarked how devalued the currency had become: “Two hundred [South African] rands—today that is twenty billion Zim dollars. Tomorrow it might be thirty billion” (Williams, 2011, p. 79). This novel was also originally published in South Africa under the title *The Billion Dollar Soccer Ball* (Williams, 2009), and before he flees to South Africa, Deo describes stuffing a billion Zim dollars in his soccer ball:

I know where Amai [mom] hides our money . . . I find several fifty million dollar notes, a few more hundred mil-

lion dollars. There is no time to count it all. It's not much, but it will buy us some food . . . I stuff them into the leather pouch. The money fills out the ball nicely, and I find a piece of string and sew up the patch. I toss the ball into the air. Nobody will know I have a billion dollars in my soccer ball. (p. 32)

The recent economic realities in Zimbabwe reveal that hyperinflation indeed made it possible for Deo to be in possession of a billion dollars.

In addition to depicting recent social, political, and economic issues happening in Zimbabwe, the novel is also a moving account of immigration and xenophobia in South Africa. Once Deo and his brother cross into South Africa, they find an opportunity to earn a living even though they are illegal immigrants—they pick tomatoes on a farm located near the border. However, this respite is temporary as Deo soon experiences the wrath of the out-of-work farmers from the neighboring village. Deo does not understand why they are so angry until his friend Philani explains:

Before the people started coming across the river from Zimbabwe, the men from Khomele village worked on the Flying Tomato Farm. . . . There are thousands of people who come to find work in South Africa. And it is hard for the men from Khomele. They lose their jobs, and then they see people come from across the river eating the food they used to eat and getting the money they used to get. They're very angry, and who can blame them? (pp. 124–126)

This fast-paced and affecting narrative of xenophobia provides readers with a realistic account of the current social, political, and economic issues at play in post-colonial Zimbabwe and South Africa. The author reveals the complex nature of oppression in post-Apartheid South Africa, which is no longer solely based on race but on nationality and is intimately intertwined with economics and the fight over resources.

Using *Now Is the Time for Running* with students opens up multiple opportunities for them to learn through inquiry and class discussion. For instance, teachers and students could explore the historical events that have led to Zimbabwe's recent economic and political struggles. They could also conduct research on similar current events at play in their own national contexts—for instance, immigration issues in the US today—and have a conversation that considers immigration and xenophobia in global, national, and local contexts.

Conclusion

My analyses of these three novels leave me convinced that reading stories about people who have experienced colonization and/or its aftermath is not only valuable, but also necessary. These narratives inform readers about the experiences of youth around the world in the recent and distant past, and may help US teachers and students cultivate empathy toward, and an ethical relationship with, cultures different from their own. Cart (2008) explains that one of the chief values of young adult literature is “its capacity to offer readers an opportunity to see themselves reflected in its pages” (para. 11). However, post-colonial young adult literature might also evoke a tension for readers who can identify with parts of the narrative, but never all of it. In other words, the experience of coming of age might be familiar to readers, but the cultures, events, and places depicted in the novels will likely not reflect readers’ own experiences. Thus, the challenge of using post-colonial young adult literature in education settings is that readers will have to grapple with both the elements in the story that echo their own lived experiences and those that evoke difference. While too great a cultural difference may alienate readers from the character’s experiences, reading about the experiences of young people coming of age elsewhere may offer some commonalities through which readers can engage difference.

Post-colonial young adult literature presents rich opportunities for classroom discussion. The literature explores multiple topics about the challenges of growing up and invites students and teachers not only to reflect on their own experiences coming of age, but also to examine their own cultures and the roles they can play in society. In addition, post-colonial young adult literature presents multidimensional account of identities—the ways in which identities such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality intersect and are shaped by historical, geographical, economic, and social contexts. Teachers who use US multicultural young adult texts in their classes might consider pairing them with post-colonial young adult texts to encourage students to examine cultural issues from local, national, and global perspectives. Finally, in both social studies and literature courses, reading narratives set at a particular moment in history presents students with the occasion to conduct further inquiry

about the historical, political, and cultural details of the story. Like Wolk (2009), I believe that the questions that come out of these conversations can lead students to become democratic citizens on local and global scales:

Classroom inquiry nurtures social responsibility, and living a socially responsible life means to live a life of inquiry No longer is the curriculum simply the novel or the facts to be learned but, rather, the students and their teacher together using books, other authentic resources, and their own opinions and experiences to create the “living curriculum” as a true community of learners. (p. 666)

Educators could also teach the traditional academic skills related to literary analysis in new ways through post-colonial young adult literature. Specifically, because these texts often refer to local languages, their vocabularies are well suited to aesthetic and linguistic analyses. Consequently, teachers would be able to use these texts in ways that go beyond typical identification of plots, themes, symbols, and character development.

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Venkatraman, P. (2008). *Climbing the stairs*. New York, NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons. In this historical fiction set in India during World War II, fifteen-year-old Vidya dreams of going to college. When her father is severely injured in a peace protest, she is forced to live with relatives who believe that she must get married and forget her aspirations for a higher education.

Williams, M. (2011). *Now is the time for running*. London, England: Little, Brown and Company. When his hometown in Zimbabwe is decimated by soldiers, fifteen-year-old Deo and his older brother Innocent run for their lives and cross the border into South Africa in search of their father. As refugees, their struggle continues when they are faced with prejudice and xenophobia.

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Join NCTE members from across the nation for NCTE's Literacy Education Advocacy Day on Thursday, April 18, 2013. NCTE members attending Advocacy Day will learn the latest about literacy education issues at the federal level and have a chance to interact with people highly involved with those issues. See <http://www.ncte.org/action/advocacyday> for details.
