



## BENDING AND BRIDGING BORDERS

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with  
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# YAL as a Tool for Healing and Critical Consciousness:

An International Perspective

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### Raúl's Welcome

**A**s a scholar from and in the Global South seeking more inclusive worldwide scholarship models (Mora, 2016), I am delighted to welcome our readers to this new column in *The ALAN Review*. Gratitude in academia is always necessary, so I would like to thank our editors, Wendy, Ricki, and Danielle, for listening to this proposal and helping bring it to fruition. Special thanks to the two contributing authors, my colleagues and friends Jurana and Phillip, for sharing their vision and work with us.

I believe that providing a larger, international scope to discussions about YAL is necessary. As English increasingly becomes a global language, practitioners and scholars must become language activists and promote language as a humanizing tool (Luke, 2004). This global vision of humanity and equity through literature will guide this and the next article for this column, and it is my hope that subsequent columns will follow this inspiration.

I believe coauthoring can be a powerful tool for creating learning communities, and these columns should be no exception. This first article features a collaborative conversation between Jurana, a pro-

fessor in Bangladesh with whom I have connected through social media, and Phillip, a professor in the United States with links to Tanzania. He also happens to be someone with whom I shared experiences during our graduate school years regarding how students from very diverse multicultural backgrounds rely on YAL to develop greater consciousness of the oppression around them (Freire, 1972; Mora, Cañas, Ocampo, Rodríguez, & López-Ladino, 2017; Willis et al. 2008) and within them (Hanh, 2006, 2012; Krishnamurti, 1969; Lama, 2006). Jurana and Phillip will share their own experiences about how YAL and a conscious stance in the classroom can support student consciousness—both of oppression and false deficit narratives of their worth.

### Young Adult Literature as a Psychological Tool across Cultures

Although the usual narratives around adolescence and trauma seem to gravitate around Global North contexts, young adult learners in the different regions where we work may also be victims of different forms of psychological trauma, including mental illness or severe rejection by peers and others (Rose, Thornicroft, Pinfold, & Kassam, 2007), which in turn demotivates them from attending schools while feeling depressed, anxious, and emotionally traumatized (Richmond, 2014). Teachers can foster empathy for affected learners by using YAL and related texts (including those emphasizing mental illness and trauma) in

their language classes to reflect the lived experiences of students (Richmond, 2014). While teaching and learning with YAL may not solve all of these learners' problems, the intentional use of YA texts can create

awareness of oppression and psychological trauma, while fostering equanimity among students.

From this perspective, we find it useful for teachers to include YAL that addresses these psychological issues in their language and literature classes. Incorporating such texts may offer students a point of reference and help them deepen understandings of the causes of many of these issues, whether

inside or outside the classroom (Perry & Stallworth, 2013). Ultimately, a healing approach to YAL in the classroom (Justice & Espinoza, 2007) may improve students' performance while reflecting the inherent dignity of students and opening spaces for humanizing discourse.

### **Healing and Critical Consciousness in Global YAL: Phillip's and Jurana's Experiences**

If psychology includes the mental and emotional factors impacting individuals' actions, how students become *psychologized* to view themselves and the world around them can influence self-esteem and self-worth while impacting them academically, socially, and personally. In classrooms where learners from multicultural backgrounds hold diverse ethnic identities, students are often conditioned by society to have false psychological views of their own abilities and worth as well as limited awareness of the causes of injustice. Freire (1972) believed transmission models of education bureaucratized minds and left students with internalized acceptance of the oppressor's deficit assumptions of the oppressed. Through dialogic practice, students and teachers can develop *conscientization*, or critical consciousness, acting against oppres-

sion (Freire, 1972, p. 69). As students in post-colonial contexts face gender, sexual, linguistic, religious, and ethnic discrimination and violence that attempts to marginalize, disempower, and dehumanize them, critical consciousness can support how students awaken to the tools of oppression and fight injustice in their daily lives.

In Tanzania, for example, gender discrimination in schools remains the norm (UNICEF, 2011, p. 24). A gender achievement gap exists between male and female students on the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) that grants students access to secondary education. Only 52% of eligible youth are enrolled in school; 1 in every 3 adolescent girls has experienced sexual violence; and facing immense pressure to abandon education and supplement their family's income, 2 of every 5 girls marry before the age of 18 (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

In the case of Bangladesh, language and literacy teachers need more training in dealing with victims and learning to manage their wounds with interventions (UNICEF, 2011). The academic achievement of these students depends upon how educators handle these interventions and the extent to which they develop a collective awareness about all levels of learners, including their educational, cultural, and economic differences. Moreover, Bangladesh is one of the developing countries of the world that fights against poverty at a slower pace (The World Bank, April 2018) while battling overpopulation, gender discrimination (World Economic Forum, 2017), and other social problems. In the case of YA learners, wounds are largely ignored in the classroom. Resources on critical practices are almost never available, and those that exist are not tailored specifically to the needs of adolescents in local educational institutions (USAID, 2017).

Education for students in Tanzania, Bangladesh, and much of the world remains heavily influenced by global educational organizations—both their funding and their underlying neo-colonial ideological assumptions about literacy. In their textual analysis of global educational statements made by both the World Bank and UNESCO, Wickens and Sandlin (2007) concluded that the World Bank “positions literacy primarily in traditional functional terms related to the labor market and individual production,” with UNESCO's viewing

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of literacy as both functional and a means of social empowerment (p. 281). A strong connection remains between literacy, the way schooling is funded, and powerful, neo-colonial forces of globalization that often perpetuate oppression in the lives of students. Yet, awareness of and actions against gender discrimination, racial profiling, religious persecution, or inequitable healthcare alone may not heal the remnants of oppression, the emotional suffering, or the false, internal script that has conditioned how students perceive their worth.

Therefore, students need classrooms that marry critical consciousness with contemplative consciousness (Hahn, 2006, 2012; Krishnamurti, 1969; Lama, 2006). Krishnamurti (1969) argued that the internalization of dominant conditioning and identities causes suffering and limits an individual's ability to see inherent worth. Thus, violence and trauma are both external and internal realities and the result of false conditioning. Recognizing the roots of violence *in* society—police brutality, educational famine, gender discrimination, neocolonial greed, class conflicts—but also *in* oneself, can produce a revolution in the mind that allows people to doubt and question everything they have been told to believe about themselves (Krishnamurti, 1969, p. 68). Since action requires seeing, people find freedom in the present moment by becoming aware of their conditioned minds and their relationships to outward things and people. Awakening to the tools of oppression *and* to their internalized conditioning frees students from the heaviness of limitations and the identities others place upon them.

Consciousness teaches impoverished students how oppressors steal and yet cannot define their inherent worth. Consciousness teaches queer students how the discourse of the oppressors maintains discriminatory laws but cannot define their inherent worth. And in the face of oppression and regardless of how others define the self, consciousness births freedom through agentive self-love. As literacy and language teachers, we can use YAL and our own conscious stance to support greater student consciousness of oppression and to remind students that they need not look to others or other things to establish their worth. This article recognizes YAL as a collection of healing mirrors offering students and teachers a truthful way of seeing the world and themselves.

## **YAL as Mirrors of Consciousness: Experiences in Tanzania**

YAL has recently embraced issues of self-worth in the face of persistent oppression and the cruelty of others. According to an analysis of literature written for youth (Koss & Teale, 2009), 25% of reviewed books focused on depression and/or mental illness issues. However, finding readily available YAL written by Tanzanian authors for Tanzanian youth—especially novels that speak to the lived experiences of youth as described above—remains a significant challenge. Not only are access to and funding of secondary schooling immense challenges to Tanzanian youth seeking literacy education (Human Rights Watch, 2017), a highly standardized and scripted government-mandated curriculum also makes including YAL in classrooms difficult. Even if YAL is published in any of Tanzania's 120 native languages or in the post-independence lingua franca, Kiswahili, English remains the language of assessment and instruction in classrooms (Mte-sigwa, 2001, p. 69). Since 1996, Mwangaza Education for Partnership in Arusha, Tanzania, has worked with Tanzanian secondary schools to improve literacy instruction and opportunities for youth to engage with meaningful and authentic texts. Despite a dearth of high-quality YAL in Tanzania, Mwangaza Education for Partnership has supported teachers in using two recent Tanzanian young adult novels. Both provide avenues for students to explore identity and healthy means of coping with traumatic experiences.

### ***Living in the Shade: Aiming for the Summit* (Esmail, 2017)**

Set amidst the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro in northern Tanzania, Nahida Esmail's sequel to *Living in the Shade* (Esmail, 2016) centers on the main character, Tatu, a girl who is albino and faces daily ridicule, hostility, and threats of violence. By setting the novel in a location that holds the highest rate of albinism in sub-Saharan Africa and one of the highest rates of violence against albino people (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 2009), Esmail delves straight into the daily experiences of youth who are born with albinism. The novel not only portrays the depth of oppression faced by Tatu and other girls who are albino, but also provides a model of advocacy and personal empowerment when the girls form

an all-girls soccer team and attempt to climb Mount Kilimanjaro. Rooted in the beliefs some hold about the mystical powers associated with albinism, violence against people who are albino remains a daily physical threat. However, the persistent and dehumanizing

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marginalization of youth who are albino in schools and society can inflict deep internal wounds, often resulting in a person's misbelief about their own dignity and worth. To this end, *Living in the Shade: Aiming for the Summit* offers a dramatic account of Tatu and her peers as they bravely stand up against external and internal violence. In addition to their fortitude, adolescent readers encounter examples of youth who confidently reject the dehumanizing efforts of

others and literally take brave steps to prioritize their own self-compassion and acceptance.

***Face under the Sea* (Mkufya, 2011)**

In his first foray into writing YAL, Tanzanian author William Mkufya won the 2017 Burt Award for African Young Adult Literature with his magical fable *Face under the Sea*. Upon the discovery of a mystical sea where fish, parrots, dolphins, and mermaids exist together, twins Naima and Rahima consider Socratic questions about the nature of life and the path toward personal happiness. Part environmental call to action, part humanizing fable, the novel follows Naima and Rahima as they stumble upon the ecosystem at the right time in their lives, since both are consumed with questions related to identity, self-exploration, and a growing realization of how they are positioned in Tanzanian society. These characters are transported not just into a realm where the universality of all beings is understood, but also into a place where paths toward personal happiness, comprised of our choices, surround us each day. Compassion for others and for all living things—the fruit of happiness—stems from acceptance and compassion for self. Young readers are offered opportunities to consider the permanent link

between authentic happiness, compassion, self-acceptance, and the interconnectivity of all beings.

**YAL as Mirrors of Consciousness: Experiences from Bangladesh**

In the case of Bangladeshi YAL, there are several prominent Bangladeshi writers who offer books to youth seeking consolation, empathy, and awakening of their own worth. This section will focus on two texts that demonstrate how authors use characters to mirror the adolescent search for self-worth and acceptance required to foster critical consciousness. Although there are several writers, both historical and contemporary, who address violence toward young adults, these texts are staples in Bangladeshi literature and popular culture and remain highly popular among teens.

***The Pather Panchali* (Bandyopadhyay, 1968)**

This novel by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay features two siblings, Opu and Durga, who try to gain inner strength to oppose conditioned obstacles in their society. The two siblings listen to their hearts about what they believe and connect with nature as a means to experience peace in their lives. Through this book, young readers can be invigorated by how the characters harmonize with nature. Durga, the protagonist, is an incarnation of a righteous soul who regularly takes refuge in nature when she is affronted by society. Whispering to the trees and butterflies and the smallest wildflowers about her suffocation and childhood pain offer solace. This awareness of her inner self helps her avoid feeling imprisoned by social norms—a concept helpful to youth who feel oppressed and need to heal their own inner wounds.

Whether or not young readers can relate to the specific oppression of these YA characters, language and literacy teachers can support the consciousness and well-being of youth by foregrounding the tranquil message of this novel. For example, Bangladeshi young women may relate to the cultural context of women being bound by patriarchal society and social constraints. Specifically, Durga's lived experiences provide a space for women to raise their voices and shift gendered limitations imposed upon them within their own cultural context. Durga's recovery involves both external and internal oppression. While students might generate written responses to *The Pather Panch-*

*ali* to reflect upon their own psychological issues, this text also offers opportunities to use Durga's reflection as a path toward personal recovery and the healing of scars. Such discussions in the classroom provide the critical motivation to address the inner demands required to push back against injustice and to engage social discriminations that often hamper youth empowerment and development.

### ***Dipu Number Two (Iqbal, 1984)***

In this novel by YA author Muhammad Zafar Iqbal, two young boys traumatized by mentally ill mothers become highly trusted friends. The 12-year-old protagonist, Dipu, is bullied daily by one of his peers, Tarique. The author delicately portrays how Dipu's visit with his long-lost mother changes how Dipu views Tarique's bullying. A visit to Tarique's home turns Dipu's anger to empathy when he observes how Tarique's mentally ill mother mistreats Tarique. Through their willingness to consider how each other's mothers inflicted suffering, Tarique and Dipu not only develop empathy for each other, but begin to heal their own suffering. Iqbal provides students with a mirror to remind them of how people's hurtful actions always reflect their own internal suffering; the root cause of anger or hatred or abuse is the abuser's pain and inability to understand and calm the deep, emotional waters that run within. As a result, youth readers may begin to understand that bullying always originates from the bully's own hurt and that bullying and verbal insulting of others hurts everyone.

Language and literacy teachers internationally can help make young adult learners aware of bullying through the analysis of scenes where the protagonist (Dipu) accepts the antagonist's (Tarique's) limitations and motivates Tarique to cease his bullying. Moreover, teachers can also promote a sense of values among students by encouraging them to discuss personal experiences with bullying, arranging seminars or workshops to talk about these connections. These shared values provide learners with a way to develop critical consciousness by analyzing the characters through a focused, critical point of view. This collaborative process offers opportunities to build awareness of the social reasons behind bullying, its deeper impact on the young generation, and potential interventions that can be implemented for victims. Teachers might also provide targeted victims with opportunities

to examine themselves through the arrangement of role-play or simulations against bullying.

## **Toward a Globally Conscious Teaching Practice with YAL**

This section frames the initial ideas from Jurana and Phillip to provide advice to teachers around the globe wanting to develop consciousness in their language and literacy classrooms. Our students need moments to heal in our classrooms. (All three of us in our home countries have firsthand experiences with different forms of conflict that make this reflection both relevant and needed.)

Both *Living in the Shade: Aiming for the Summit* and *Face under the Sea* use protagonists typically marginalized by race, ethnicity, and poverty to speak to the lives of Tanzanian youth and illuminate a conscious path toward internal peace

and happiness. Tatu and her fellow female characters who are albino become empowered when they cease to be embarrassed or demeaned by that which they cannot control: the pigmentation of their skin, eyes, and hair. Twins Naima and Rahima retreat to a mythical world within the sea where the universal wisdom expressed by creatures directs the twins to take responsibility for their own happiness. Similarly, *The Pather Panchali* and *Dipu Number Two* unveil stories of youth resisting the imposed identities of others and using introspection, empathy, and discourse with others to bravely reassert their own authentic voice and identity. Amid gender violence and oppression, Durga turns to nature, where her contemplation and mindfulness bring her to her peaceful, inner self. Himu develops this same compassion for self as he realizes he has the power to resist his father's wishes for his life. Dipu and Tarique recognize the effects of a mother's mental illness upon each other, which leads to heightened empathy for each other and compassion for self. To this end, in the following sections, we present four guidelines for using YAL to heal and raise student (and teacher) consciousness.

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### **Adopt a Conscious Stance as a Teacher**

Kabat-Zinn (2006) defined mindfulness as the awareness emerging from paying attention on purpose in the present moment. Any consciousness-focused teaching must begin with our own contemplative work and an effort to seek greater understanding of the impediments within us that prevent us from being more compassionate to others and to ourselves. The Dalai Lama (2006) reminded us that before rectifying the wrongs of the world, compassion first requires us to overcome the distortions and afflictions of our own mind, calming and eventually dispelling our own anger and creating our internal present-moment awareness and peace. Students need us to develop our ability to look deeply within ourselves and to find our own inner peace. In what ways do we need to forgive and accept ourselves or others? In what ways do we need to prioritize our own self-care? In what ways do we need to act with greater kindness? The less aware we are of our internal landscape, the more suffering we cause ourselves and the less compassion we can offer students.

Thich Nhat Hanh (2006) says that love is the ability to recognize another person's suffering and gently convey, "I am here for you." A loving, conscious stance in the classroom, then, requires close, persistent watching of students in order to understand their human suffering. A conscious stance values students' worth and acknowledges the need for dialogue to help them recognize their internal or external sources of suffering. Only then can we promote and model radical self-love and acceptance. Happiness comes from agency as we empower learners "to use their voices as a tool to express their thoughts, feelings, and opinions" (Cañas, Ocampo, Rodríguez, López-Ladino, & Mora, 2018) and to ultimately recognize their inherent, human power.

### **Closely Observe Students' Lives before Selecting YA Novels**

Just as a conscious stance brings awareness to what needs to be healed, YA books can provide a mirror for healing. As learners are often reluctant to read YAL, open choices and the use of student input should influence the choosing of novels. Research has shown that forced book choices can have a negative effect on motivation if students are expected to read texts that

do not speak to them (Morgan & Wagner, 2013). A more useful approach to introducing YAL is to have open conversations in which students and teachers relate real-life experiences that shape the ultimate selection of titles read. These conversations may bridge past and present worlds as we pair young adult and classic literature (Gibbons, Dail, & Stallworth, 2006).

### **Practice Compassion—for the Self and for Students**

Just as Freire (1972) argued that we are all teachers and learners, teaching must ultimately be a response to the lives of students. Since greater consciousness brings forth increased compassion, acceptance, and love, reading YA novels can contribute toward more humanizing classrooms. In that sense, this goes beyond reading selection (without ignoring the power of reading choices as catalysts for compassionate teaching). Deep observation and discussion of the suffering and humanity of characters in YA books provide teachers and students opportunities to co-construct identities and to offer each other compassion.

### **Rethink the Selection of Texts beyond Traditional Milieus**

From a larger international perspective, we believe it is relevant to offer English language learners around the world literature options that extend beyond traditional English dialects (i.e., American or British) (Mora, 2013). As seen in the examples shared by Jurana and Phillip, YAL provides diverse opportunities for cross-cultural consciousness and encourages readers to learn to appreciate other English varieties and literary expressions as worthy. In addition, such an approach allows students coming from the Global South the opportunity to identify themselves more closely with the texts they read in class and use them as tools for cross-cultural communication.

### **Conclusion**

Literature in the classroom can be powerful beyond our traditional expectations. YAL, as a worldwide phenomenon, has the potential to help students and teachers alike turn classroom practices into spaces for safety, community, and restoration. Students around the world bring everyday lives, conflicts, and futures with them. Our work has always gone beyond trans-

mitting literature; teachers have always made *living literature* a key component of their work.

As a community becomes increasingly less idiosyncratic and more threaded, as seen in this cultural moment, it is important to continue engaging in dialogic spaces. For the three of us, writing this column taught us about how much we can learn from each other when we are all willing to listen and contribute. Consciousness, presence, compassion, and healing are elements we want our teachers to incorporate and our students to experience. Through loving observations of students; the counter-narratives presented by YAL; and the use of compassionate, humanizing pedagogies with students, classrooms can offer students mirrors in which they are reminded and awakened to the permanence of their worth. Uplifting students is a unifying desire we continually discover as we talk to teachers all over the world. We hope this International YAL column can open more conversations and spaces where scholars from every continent, from the North and the South, and from different language backgrounds (using English as language mediator) can build common ground benefiting our students.

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**Phillip Wilder** is an assistant professor of literacy at Clemson University, South Carolina. A former secondary teacher and literacy coach, Phillip spent seventeen years as a practitioner, including seven years partnering with teachers on responsive literacy instruction while working at the Center for Education in Small Urban Communities at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Whether in his role as the Senior Education Advisor to Mwangaza Education for Partnership in Arusha, Tanzania, where he guides a grassroots organization in supporting critically conscious schools and communities, or as a consultant to states and school districts designing capacity-building models of professional learning, Phillip prioritizes partnerships that use design-based research and teacher empow-

erment as critical tools for supporting student literacies. His research documents this collaborative work with the hope of creating more humanizing pedagogies, policies, and educational spaces for students and teachers within schools and communities.

**Raúl Alberto Mora** is an associate professor at the School of Education and Pedagogy at Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana in Medellín, Colombia, where he teaches courses on methods, qualitative research, literacy, and critical theory. He currently chairs the Literacies in Second Languages Project (LSLP) research lab. Raúl has been a visiting and guest lecturer at several universities in Colombia and abroad, as well as an education consultant for the Colombian Ministry of Education and the Colombian Fulbright Commission. His research interests include the study of second language literacy practices in urban spaces and gaming communities in Medellín, the translation of alternative literacies to second-language instruction and teacher education (all with LSLP researchers), the use of critical theory in education, and transmedial discourse in sociocultural studies. You can follow Raúl online through his personal website (<http://elpatronhimsself.net>), the LSLP website (<http://literaciesinl2project.org>), and on Twitter (@elpatronhimsself and @lslp\_colombia).

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