Reading the World: Reconceptualizing Reading Multicultural Literature in the English Language Arts Classrooms in a Global World

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Abstract

This paper examines scholarship and empirical work on the use of multicultural literature in the English Language Arts classroom in the United States in the context of globalization. Studies in the United States tend to focus on diversity within the nation to the neglect of diversity beyond the States. Beyond multicultural perspectives as it is framed in the U.S. context, a global/local perspective that recognizes diversity within and beyond the nation is a more relevant construct for examining the literature curriculum in this globalized postmodernity.

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Introduction

...we must expand the horizons against which questions of how and what to read and write are both posed and answered.

(Said 1993, 385)

I don’t think there’s any other special way that we read it if it is from another place. We’re just reading it.

(Sammy, 15 years old, Salmon Creek High school, New York State, U.S.A. on reading Red Scarf Girl by Jiang Ji-Li in class)

In this age of globalization, of increasing media and migration flows (Appadurai 1996), where “all of us are, willy-nilly, by design or default, on the move” (Bauman, 1998, 2), one needs to understand difference and complexity within and beyond the locality of one’s physical neighbourhood. In this context where individuals are both global and national citizens, there is a need to rethink and re-vision what counts as knowledge (Kelly, Luke & Green, 2008). In the contemporary context of the USA, with immigration and greater numbers of foreign-born students in American schools and society (C. Suárez-Orozco 2004; M. M. Suárez-Orozco 2001; M. M. Suárez-Orozco & Sattin 2007), multicultural conversations in the English Language Arts (ELA) classroom are becoming increasingly salient.

My concern in this paper is with rethinking and re-visioning what counts as knowledge in the literature curriculum in the area of the use of multicultural literature in the English Language Arts classroom in the United States. In this paper, I examine scholarship and empirical research on the use of multicultural literature in the ELA classroom with a view to answer the following questions: (1) What kinds of multicultural literary texts do students read in ELA classrooms in the United States?
(2) How do these readings shape their sense of self in relation to the world, including their identities as both national and global citizens?

**Literary Narratives and American Subjectivities**

The belief in the role of literary texts in shaping individual subjectivities of citizens can be seen by the importance placed on the kinds of official literary texts read in the classroom. In the United States, the ongoing debate as to whether there is one static, monologic version of American cultural literacy (Hirsch 1987) or whether students should be encouraged to engage in ‘culturally relevant conversations’ that change with the times (Applebee 1996) is, in effect, a debate over what constitutes a literate American citizen. Literary texts can play a definitive role in the mediation of individual subjectivities; for example, in the construction of a subjugated colonial Other (Said 2000; Viswanathan 1989) or of a particular national identity (Applebee 1974; Collins & Blot 2003; Wertsch 2002), which accounts for the importance placed on the official texts that students read. In her sociological study of more than 200 classic and popular texts, Corse (1997) demonstrates how the national canon serves the purpose of constructing a particular identity through the selection of what gets canonized as representative of national culture. In another example, Arc (1994) demonstrates in his historical study of Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* how the reading of the American classic as the tale of an independent, free-spirited soul is the result of complex interpretations of writers and publishers pushing for particular official readings of the text. Literary narratives on the curriculum thus serve ideological purposes (Apple 1992; Graff 1987; Luke & Freebody 1997), shaping through texts selected *and* the ways they are read particular understandings of what it means to be American (Collins & Blot 2003).
In examining the use of multicultural literature in the ELA classroom, I focus on the role of the imagination in the construction of identities through reading. I draw from Anderson’s (1991) concept of the “imagined communities” of the nation, which are mediated in part by the printed text. In the context of globalization, Appadurai (1996), drawing on Anderson, further argues that the imagination plays a key role in allowing ordinary individuals to envision what Bruner (1986) terms “possible worlds.” Langer (1995, p. 5) puts it this way: “Literature… sets the scene for us to explore both ourselves and others, to define and redefine who we are, who we might become, and how the world might be.”

Textual mediation, in the form of texts read and the ways they are read, thus contribute to the imaginings of individual subjectivities by providing visions of worlds, and influencing the perception of self in relation to others in the world. I argue that in this globalized context, students must learn to envision self as both American and global citizen and that the worlds and worldviews in literary texts allow for imaginings and conversations about self and self in relation to the world.

References to self in relation to others are necessary in our framings of the world, for it is in comparison with fixed essential others that one can begin to frame one’s understanding of the world. Paradoxically, understanding the complexity of others requires the acknowledgement that complexity and difference exists, and that assumptions only exist in order to be displaced. We respond to the worldviews of others in order to learn more about others, and about our own visions of the world (Bakhtin 1986).

In the dialogic process of reading (Bakhtin 1981, 1986; Holquist 1990; Sumara 1996), continually fraught with the tension of competing voices or
worldviews, both within the text and between the text and the reader, readers respond not just to the words but also to the worldviews encoded in the text. The reader moves and relocates “one’s [sic] self to a co-emergent world” where there is “continual bridging of newly opened spaces – gaps – that make themselves present in the ever-emerging intertextual fabric of lived experience” (Sumara 1996, p. 78). The self is a text (Bruner & Weisser 1991) upon which the narratives of the literary texts read ascribe themselves onto as the reader actively negotiates with the worldviews and stories in the texts, sometimes connecting with the message or the text, other times resisting, but always building new understandings of self and others in the process of reading. In responding to the literary text, the reader continually reorganizes identity (Sumara 1998), shifting and positioning self in relation to the text and world during and after the reading experience. In reading particular kinds of multicultural texts, students are then given chances to explore self in relation to others in specific contexts including that of ethnicity, gender, social class and nation.

**Multicultural Literature in the United States**

Scholarship and empirical studies on the use of multicultural literature in the ELA classroom in the United States usually define multicultural literature as diverse literature within the American context (e.g., Cai 1998; Fang, Fu, & Lamme 1999; Yokota 1993). Some scholars use the term ‘multicultural literature’ to refer to “literature by and about various people belonging to various self-identified ethnic, racial, religious, and regional groups in American society” (Fang et al. 1999, p. 260). Others such as Cai (1998) believe that the use of multicultural literature has an explicitly political function of redressing inequities in American society.

What is common across definitions is the limitation of the term ‘multicultural
literature’ to the study of diverse literature within the United States, which, as Jordan & Purves (1993) argue, tends towards a certain ethnocentricity in the focus on cultural diversity within the country. Most studies focus on race and ethnicity, with some studies on gender (e.g., Henry 1998; Sutherland 2005) or social class (e.g., Beach, Thein & Parks 2008; Thein, Beach & Parks 2007). While some studies on multicultural literature included international literature from beyond the United States (e.g., Boyd 2002; Dressel 2005), no qualitative distinctions are made between diverse literature from within and beyond the United States in the studies. This lack of distinction is a problematic glossing over in the scholarship in this area, an issue I will return to later.

Culturally Responsive Perspectives

Studies approach the issue of using multicultural literature from either dominantly culturally responsive or cross-cultural perspectives. From culturally responsive perspectives, it is argued that multicultural education should be about minority or oppressed groups (Cai 1998). Literary texts that feature protagonists from the same culture, often in terms of race or ethnicity, can affirm students’ views of themselves by providing representations in literary narratives (Brooks 2006; Ferdman 1990) and may be a springboard for discussion of culturally relevant issues (Sutherland 2005). In Brooks’ (2006) study of African-American students reading “culturally conscious” (Sims 1982) adolescent literature, she points to how these texts with African-American main protagonists can affirm or validate the identities of the African-American students reading the texts. At the same time, she suggests that a critical reading that takes into account both the background of the reader and the textual features of the literary narratives can better inform curricula and instruction.
In another study in an urban district, Henry (1998) facilitated an out-of-class transitional English as a Second Language program for four African-Caribbean girls using a variety of multicultural texts which they could relate to, including *The Diary of Loyota Hunter at Junior High* (Hunter 1992), a biography of a Jamaican girl living in New York. Through their engagement with the texts, these students were able to give voice to their concerns, addressing issues that they faced in daily lives such as growing up and adapting to a new place.

In these studies, one goal of using multicultural literary texts can be said to stretch the imagination of these minority students, so as to enable them to envision and have conversations about the world with which they are familiar. Literary texts that feature main protagonists from the same race or ethnicity, facing similar adolescent issues, provide discursive spaces for conversations about self, and self in relation to the world. The use of these literary texts also serve to extend the students’ visions of what constitutes the American experience, expanding the voices in literary texts beyond monolithic white, and often male, voices, to include ones they may find resonance with as members of a minority group.

However, one danger with the use of multicultural literature from culturally responsive perspectives is that of stereotyping the student into particular marked categories - for example, assuming a single version of African-American, Asian, or Chicana (e.g., Altieri 1985; Brooks 2006; Dernersesian 2001; Dudley-Marling 2003). In addition, it is possible that other students in a classroom with students of different races or ethnicity may be alienated. In Glazier & Seo’s (2005) study of students in one high school classroom reading *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (Momaday 1995), they found that while the minority students were able to identify personally with the text
and participated more in class discussions, some White students who saw themselves as ‘cultureless’ felt excluded, in part because of text choice and in part because of the instructional methods that encouraged only aesthetic identification with characters in the story. This case study also exemplifies a problematic focus in classroom instruction on personal identification to the neglect of critical appreciation. The conflation of personal identification with the aesthetic is problematic in stripping the aesthetic of its interpretative and critical possibilities (Lewis 2000). While culturally conscious literary texts can serve as points of entry into literature and life, critical readings are also essential for effective learning to take place.

Cross-Cultural Readings

Another dominant approach to the use of multicultural literature in ELA classrooms is the cross-cultural approach. Studies from cross-cultural perspectives may range from mere tourist excursions into other cultures through exposure to more serious explorations of cultural similarities and differences through the reading of multicultural literature (Ostrowski 1997). The analogy of the window is often used (Galda 1998; Glazier & Seo 2005; Sipe 1998) to illustrate the potential of multicultural literature in exposing students to cultures other than their own. For example, students in one 10th Grade class reading *The Joy Luck Club* (Tan 1989) were able to appreciate cross-cultural differences, as well as see similarities across different ethnicities in generational issues between parents and children as a result of their study of the text (Athanases 1993).

In a six-month study of one English Honours class in an urban school, Spears-Bunton (1990) saw how a diverse class in an urban setting reacted positively to the study of a culturally conscious text, *The House of Die Drears* (Hamilton 1968).
Through detailed case-studies of two students, Courtney and Tasha, Spears-Bunton showed how these students were able to engage in the text and begin to think about racism in their lives. Spears-Bunton suggests that using culturally conscious texts in the ELA classroom may encourage “turned-off readers” to return to “the world of literacy” and “provide a bridge upon which both African American and European American adolescent readers may build and ultimately expand their literacy experiences” (p. 573). She also suggests that these texts provide a kind of literacy which encourage students to think deeply, to question, reflect and participate in the ongoing dialogue about traditions and ideas. This particular example illustrates how a well-chosen multicultural text, accompanied with appropriate instruction, can reach out to students, and allow room for dialogue about cultural issues.

The use of a variety of cross-cultural literary texts can serve to portray a pluralistic and changing American world. In another ethnographic study of two high school classes reading a variety of multicultural texts, Athanases (1998) reported that the classes, comprising diverse students, were able to appreciate the variety of multicultural texts used in the classroom. Through the study of a variety of texts, including The Joy Luck Club (Tan 1989) and Black Boy (Wright 1945), students were able to reflect on their personal self-identity as well as their relations to and with others from diverse backgrounds. Students reported learning about others as well as revising notions of cultural others. For example, a Mexican student, Viva, reported that reading Black Boy made her want to know more about “those Jim Crow rules they had … and why everyone was like that. Why did that make such a difference, someone’s skin color?” In these two classrooms, the students were given opportunities to imagine self in relation to others in the world, and to reposition
themselves in their understanding of others and the world through literary engagement.

It is important to note, however, that the use of multicultural texts in these two classrooms were accompanied with specific instructional strategies that highlighted discussion and conversation among students. Instructional methods that focus on mere exposure may be inadequate, in that they do not take into account the varied representation of different literary texts, and possible distortions in representation (Dudley-Marling 2003; Gates 2003; Harada 1994; Sims Bishop 2003). Yet, accompanied with appropriate pedagogy where discussion and critical reading is encouraged, exposure to cultures through literary texts provide a way for students to learn more about the world, and about self in response to a more diverse world (Athanases 1993, 1998; Beach 1997; Dressel 2005; Spears-Bunton 1990).

**Envisioning Possible Identities through Reading Multicultural Literary Texts**

Another body of research examined more explicitly how texts and identities are interconnected, with literary narratives providing a space for students to envision or imagine possible selves (McGinley & Kamberelis 1996; McGinley et al. 1997; Sutherland 2005) in relation to the world. Booth (2006) proposes that students can learn to be ethical readers because narratives provide the resource for negotiating the complexities of life through literature, and this notion is evidenced in McGinley & Kamberelis’ (1996) study where they show how 3rd to 5th grade students learn to negotiate social worlds through their interaction with multicultural literature. The stories read in the classroom functioned in the “children's lives as sources of personal, social, or political understanding and exploration” (p. 44).
In Sutherland’s (2005) study of six African-American girls studying Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1994), as part of a semester-long unit on “Identity” in their dominantly Black class, she traces how six girls in a small-group discussion used the literary text as a space for dialogue about the dominant themes of Black women and beauty, and the perception of others about Black women. The participants were able to make sense of literature through their connections with life, and the literary text served as a point of entry for discussions about issues that were relevant to these girls. The Black girls used their co-construction of the text to negotiate their identities as Black women in today’s society, and they told Sutherland they thought it was important to see people like themselves in literature who had to deal with similar issues. Also affirming the literary text as a space for identity negotiation and construction is Smith’s (2005) action-research study with six book club members – two African American, one Latina and European bicultural, and two European American girls – reading *I Hadn’t Meant to Tell You* (1994) and *Maizon at Blue Hill* (1992) by Jacqueline Woodson, an African American writer of books for children and young adults. Smith’s study takes it further in examining how reading the multicultural text also served as a space for critical reflection for the girls of different ethnicities. She suggests that students bring their own identities, informed by their own cultural communities and global perspectives about race into this intimate discourse. The African-American students, as knowledgeable others, were able to share their experiences with the other students, and the group co-constructed personal meaning together.

The positions taken during the reading and discussions as well as reflections are all instances of what I term *identity play*. Literary texts can provide spaces for

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1 I use this term as Sutherland uses it, and she explains in her study that it was how the girls referred to themselves and chose to be identified.
students to imagine self in relation to world through their textual and discussion encounters. Multicultural literary narratives can be seen to provide spaces for identity play, for imagining particular visions of self in relation to the world, whether one that is marked by race and ethnicity or gender or social class. In a Bakhtinian sense (Bakhtin 1981, 1986), dialogic interaction between self and text takes place as the reader responds to the text. In the process, the reader envisions possible worlds, in affirmation, negotiation, or in resistance to the text (Beach 1997; Rabinowitz & Smith 1990). As such, the Black girls in Sutherland’s (2005) study engage in discussions that spring from and contribute to their visions of themselves as African-American women and their positions in relation to others in their communities, and the students in Smith’s (2005) study understand different positions in relation to self as they discuss different multicultural texts. In a curriculum with a diversity of texts and where discussion is encouraged, students are provided with opportunities to see self in relation to a diverse world, and position themselves in relation to various communities and values (Athanas 1998). They “try on” (Thein et al. 2007) various perspectives, engaging with worldviews within the text to imagine self in relation to others in the world. These constructions of self are negotiated within particular “cultural worlds” (Thein 2005) or “ascribed boundaries” (Sutherland 2005), and students reorganize their identity in their responses to the reading, building upon previous histories of reading and identity moves.

Critical Readings and Meaningful Conversations

Yet, it is not just what is read but how these texts are read that are important (Said 1993). As seen from the quote at the beginning of this paper, Sammy, a participant in a recent study I conducted with a 9th grade class in a rural school reading Red Scarf
*Girl* (Jiang 1997), a memoir set in China during the Cultural Revolution, articulates what research tells us – students do not naturally read in a culturally aware or critically reflexive manner (Dressel 2005; Jordan & Purves 1993). Effective multicultural education is thus as much about cultivating critical reading dispositions as it is about the kinds of literary texts that students read in the classroom. These critical reading dispositions include reading with awareness of cultural complexity, understanding multiple viewpoints, and asking critical questions about the text (Dressel 2005; Enciso 1997; Gates 2003). Critical literacy suggests attention to the social constructedness of language through reflective and reflexive engagement with the text (Shor 1999), directing observation to the interconnectedness of both the world and the word (Freire & Macedo 1987). Thein, Beach and Parks (2007) show how two groups of White students studying a multicultural text come face to face with a variety of perspectives different from their own, and experience tension between the beliefs and perspectives they bring with them and those they meet in the text worlds. They negotiate their understanding and their belief systems to “try on” new perspectives and recognize that other ways of understanding exist even if they do not agree with them. This way of thinking about the study of literary texts as dialogic interaction between students, texts and contexts recognizes that multiple perspectives that exists, and encourages teaching students these dispositions of viewing life and literature through classroom reading and discussion practices. We do not know how many times this “reperceptivity” (Naidoo 1992) needs to happen before it adds up to something, but the literature classroom should provide the opportunity for students to continually re-vision and revise their view of the world around them, and their sense of self in relation to the world.
Part of that critical reflexivity includes recognizing one’s limited cultural perspective and experiences in reading a text, and may include deliberately restraining the urge to identify with the character (Lewis 2000). Instead, a cultural and critical reflexivity may require the student to ask what he or she is missing in terms of the information that might help him or her understand the text better. Students take on a “multicultural stance” (Fang et al. 1999; Glazier & Seo 2005), a critical literacy approach which includes questioning the author, the text, and the reader, paying attention to what the student as reader brings to the text, questioning the authenticity of a multicultural text as representation, and recognizing the historical and material layers of construction of the identity of the reader and the text. These habits of the mind (Purves 1993; Thein et al. 2007) have to be learned, and in order to help students acquire such habits, teachers need to keep the goal in view and ask the right questions. Cultivating critically and culturally reflexive reading dispositions allows for critical dialogue to take place in the multicultural classroom.

From Multicultural Imaginings to Global/Local Imaginings

Thus, in the United States context, studies demonstrate that culturally responsive literature can provide opportunities for imagining possibilities of self in relation to the world. At one level, cultural affirmation can be provided through exposure to main protagonists that share the same culture as the reader. From cross-cultural perspectives, exposure to literary texts about other cultures allow for the imagination of a world where self exists in relation to others. At another level, literary texts serve as points of entry and discursive spaces for conversations about self and world, whether one that is inclusive of one’s race and ethnicity or one that includes a pluralistic world. These multicultural conversations accompanied with critically and
culturally reflexive discussions of self in relation to world are culturally relevant for today’s world. Raising such conversations through the use of literary narratives in the ELA classroom provide spaces for students to discuss and envision possible worlds that contribute to the “history-in-person” (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain 1998; Holland & Lave 2001) or the sum of experiences that add to individual constructions of individual subjectivities and identities.

Despite the potential of multicultural literature, one limitation with the current construct of multicultural literature is that the image of diversity only within the United States is insufficient to deal with an increasingly complex world where it is not just diversity within the country, but diversity beyond the nation that needs to be taken into account. Qualitatively different conversations arise from the different emphasis on race and ethnicity, gender, disability or social class, though they may overlap. In the abovementioned study, where students read Red Scarf Girl (Jiang 1997), conversations about self as American, and nation (America) in relation to world (in this case, China), occurred as a result of the use of a text that was culturally distant from this particular group of students. Just as conversations about race, ethnicity and gender (e.g., Brooks 2006; Henry 1998; Sutherland 2005) are raised through the use of particular literary texts in the classroom, so conversations about self in relation to the world at large are encouraged through literary selections that may be culturally distant from the students reading them.

To read only within the country at issue is to ignore that there are other literary texts in the world, written from different perspectives and often in different ways. For example, an examination of the Nobel Prize Literature winners in the past century will reveal an increasing diversity of writers from different parts of the world, including Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio (2008, France & Mauritius), Doris Lessing (2006,
United Kingdom), Orhan Pamuk (2006, Turkey), Elfiede Jelinek (2004, Austria), Gao Xinjiang (2000, China) and Wislawa Szymborska (1996, Poland), to name a few recent awardees. These different voices say what they mean differently, and a form of cultural literacy is to be able to read literary texts knowing there might be a different way of understanding, different information required, because one is unable to generalize from one’s own experiences and prior reading habits. Students need to be exposed to diverse texts at national and global level to be exposed to different voices, and learn that there are differences and similarities across cultural and national borders, and come to terms with the complexities of human relations.

At the end of the day, while the notion of the canon is a man-made construct, the canon remains an important representation of what a society values (Corse 1997). Schools have their own canonical list of young adult readings as well (Purves 1993), and these school readings form part of that canonical heritage in presenting to students works that are deemed worthy of study. When we fail to consciously expand the conversation about curriculum choice to include culturally diverse texts from beyond the nation, we fail to recognize that there are voices outside the nation that must also be heard. Educators need to consciously consider diverse texts both within and beyond the United States as they consider the needs of their students in order to convey a sense of what is important to their students. This new view of curriculum calls for a new view of cultural literacy, not in Hirsch’s (1987) rigid sense, but in the sense of recognizing that literary narratives are a rich resource for conversations about issues that preoccupy self and world. A list provides starting point for a conversation, and it is important that culturally diverse literature from within and beyond the nation gets placed on the list and included in the ongoing conversation about what is culturally relevant for our students. While all texts are ultimately multicultural in that
they arise from a particular culture, educators have to consciously determine what kinds of conversations they intend to generate with the kinds of literary texts they choose to place on the curriculum.

As I have shown in the review of the scholarship and empirical research on the use of multicultural literature in America, in American constructions of the multicultural curriculum, conversations about self in relation to the larger community of the world are often neglected. In an age of increasing cross-cultural interactions, where one’s neighbour extends beyond physical boundaries (Bauman 1998), it is vital to include conversations about the global in tandem with conversations about the local. While there is a growing body of research literature and teacher accounts on international literature (e.g., Binen 2002; Coltrane 2002; Freeman, Lehman & Scharer 2007; Hadaway & McKenna 2007), multicultural and world literature are often not examined in tandem with each other. I suggest that it is important to think in terms of both global and local conversations about diversity within and beyond the nation in thinking about literary texts in the ELA curriculum.

The global and local are very much interlinked in this globalized postmodernity, and new contexts require new lenses through which to examine the study of literature. There needs to be a movement beyond the idea that one moves linearly from an awareness of diversity within country to beyond the country, for example, in Banks’ (1981) earlier formulation of multiethnic education. Rather, what is required is a recursive movement between global and local literatures, foregrounding diversity at both global and local levels, with the local being defined as that which is culturally closer to the reader and global as that which is situated beyond the nation. Through attention to a global/local construct in curriculum choices, students can be made aware of a larger world beyond the nation through the study of
literary texts in settings outside America. What has been commonly termed international literature in the American context must be placed alongside multicultural conversations focusing on diversity within the country to ensure that culturally relevant conversations are brought into the classroom. In that way, conversations about difference and complexity both within and beyond the nation can be brought into ELA classroom conversations through literary texts chosen for study.

In addition, literary narratives that consciously raise conversations about cross-cultural interaction should be brought into the classroom to encourage discussions about self in relation to world. For example, Anita Desai’s (2000) *Winterscape*, a short story about a Canadian-educated Indian, married to a Caucasian-Canadian, and their interactions with his Indian aunt and mother, is an example of a literary narrative that provides room for rich discussion about different cultures and voices. Coupled with instructional methods that encourage dialogue and critical and cultural reflexivity, there will be much potential for students to explore cross-cultural issues, and to widen their imagination through their engagement with literary narratives in the classroom.

A global/local curriculum framework goes beyond the multicultural framework in forcing attention to diversity both within and beyond a nation, thus recognizing that the conversations that students should engage in are intimately interconnected at different levels of community. In addition, it suggests that curriculum planning is relational, needing to take into account the context of the reading, the reader and the text. The principle for curriculum choice becomes one that is relative to place and time – the kinds of literary texts that are culturally relevant are those that both engage in issues that are close to home, and reach out to the world (which, I argue, ultimately becomes close to home in this global interconnected
world). In such a curriculum, both culturally responsive and cross-cultural perspectives are returned to recursively, to extend the kinds of culturally relevant conversations that students engage in during literature classes. Literary narratives thus become spaces for students to engage in meaningful conversations about self and world, and in that process, perhaps learn more about themselves as both Americans and global citizens.

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