

Playing Past Racial Silence: Cultivating Conversations on Racial Identity through Sports-Related Young Adult Literature

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Too often, classroom conversations and literature choices frame race in homogenizing terms, equating racial identity solely with the experience of marginalization. This can have a chilling effect on students whose cultural context has made race an inaccessible topic, positioning conversations about racial identity beyond their zone of proximal development. Leveraging reflections from student-athletes and an analysis of three YA texts, the authors argue that sports-centered YA literature, by normalizing depictions of race, might be leveraged to serve as a critical entry point for robust classroom conversations about the complexity of racial identity, adding nuance and accessibility to a taboo subject.

Prelude

As we are putting the finishing touches on this piece, the nation is immersed in a historic period of protest, unrest, and soul-searching in the wake of yet another extrajudicial killing of a Black citizen. Events like these bring the tenuous nature of race relations, and the ongoing malignancy of systemic and institutional racism in the United States into sharp contrast, illuminating experiences that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPoC) know well, and live with daily. And this year, athletes and sports have been at the center of many of these conversations.

Racism, and the Eurocentric coloniality that it grows out of are, in a sense, our nation's original sin (Kendi, 2017), and as has become clear in this most recent moment of unrest, an impasse

and debt that requires accounting by all individuals, not just those of us saddled with melanated skin. If we are to move towards an anti-racist society, there is a critical, pressing urgency of engaging *all* youth—not just BIPoC youth—in examining, understanding, and taking responsibility for, racialized experiences and racism. It is in this spirit that we write, keenly aware that research shows that early and meaningful engagements with discussions of race and racism—meaning conversations with youth, adolescents, and teens early and often in schools—are the best way to tear out the ontological roots of racism (Ayón, 2016; Risman & Banerjee, 2016).

INTRODUCTION

While issues of representation and multiculturalism still persist in children's and young adult (YA) literature (e.g. Horning, et al., 2019), race and racism have become common, even trendy, topics for texts that have become increasingly popular with educators in our diversifying schools. Classics like Walter Dean Myers's *Monster*, Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, Nikki Grimes's *Bronx Masquerade*, and more recent additions including Angie Thomas's *The Hate You Give*, Jason Reynolds's *Long Way Down* and *All American Boys* (co-authored with Brendan Kiely), and Nic Stone's *Dear Martin* all present compelling narratives centering issues of race and racism in America. Yet these widely read texts (and others like them), with their focus on issues of inequity in the justice system, police brutality, and racial trauma and violence, are easily misconstrued by teachers attempting to be more culturally responsive in their text selections. In essence, even as efforts are made to better engage with questions of race and racism, it is possible to unintentionally reinforce racial caricatures and unidimensional understandings of racialized experience and identity.

At the same time, sports, and the presence and significance of generative, positive racial identities within it, have never been more apparent in our cultural world. Athlete activists are raising their voices with increasing power and influence on topics both in, and beyond, athletics and the sports world. The impact of figures like Colin Kaepernick, LeBron James, and Naomi Osaka has been substantial well beyond their respective leagues, and their calls for inclusion and acknowledgement of marginalized experience have helped to display the varied, multidimensional reality of BIPoC's lives.

As we consider these two contrasting realities, and what they mean for classrooms, youth, and learning about race, we—a Chicano teacher educator working in predominantly BIPoC setting, and a White classroom teacher in an affluent, but multicultural, private school—are struck by the

ways in which we have seen student athletes, and the cultural practice of sport in general, facilitate more honest engagements with racial, ethnic, and cultural identity than classroom discussion could manage. Ultimately, we find ourselves eager to consider the following: How can depictions of sport and young athletes' experiences in YA literature create inviting spaces through which to open conversations around the complexity and ubiquity of racial identity and experience?

Building from this question, this article presents an analysis of how sports-related YA literature might be leveraged to serve as a critical entry point for robust classroom conversations about the complexity of racial identity in varied cultural contexts; adding nuance, richness, and accessibility to conversations that too often are framed in homogenizing terms. Framed through a decolonial lens, and supported by insights and reflections from adolescent student-athletes grappling with questions of race in their affluent, private school context, we begin by discussing race and racial identity, issues of curricular silencing, the significance of sport. We then consider how three sports-centered YA texts include elements that depict nuanced, complex reflections of racial identity development and invite meaningful, but accessible, discussions of race.

A DECOLONIAL VIEW OF RACE AND RACIAL IDENTITY

We approach this work with a decolonial framework, recognizing that the racism and marginalization of BIPoC we see today are reflections of the malignant legacies of racism and colonization that have persisted, evolved, and manifested in new ways across 500 years of history (Quijano, 2000). This lingering, insidious malaise that impacts and shapes everything from the nature of what we value in schools to the types and themes of the texts we read and see as “canon” to the persistent divide between White owners/administrators and coaches and predominantly BIPoC athletes in leagues at every level is best understood as *coloniality* (e.g. Hernández, 2018). These are the ways that *de jure* systems of oppression took on new guises, ensuring relationships remained stratified, and White culture dominant. The inverse of this, decolonization, invites us to actively account for this ongoing, *de facto* process of oppression and consider how to actively disrupt, unravel, and reimagine our worlds, relationships, and ideologies by investing ourselves in challenging conversation and action that moves the perspectives and concerns of BIPoC from the margins, to the center, of what we do.

A significant piece of this task that we wish to take up here is the challenge of seeking to appreciate and see commonly accepted social phenomena and concepts in ways that diverge from normative, mainstream, and Eurocentric constructions. Particularly, common, mainstream, and

Eurocentric understandings of race continue to perpetuate the myth that our racial identities are fixed, static, and rooted in physiology alone (Gould, 1996; Willinsky, 1998). Though masked as “common sense,” these attitudes are based in colonial pseudo-science, inextricably linked to Eugenics, and best understood as scientific racism (DiAngelo, 2016), reflecting White, Eurocentric thinking on race and racial identity. Such attitudes perpetuate the notion that racial identity is simply “skin deep” and thus eliminating racism simply requires color-blindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2018)—ignoring the presence of melanin but also its social and material consequences—to overcome our phenotypical differences. This pernicious, ahistorical perspective is self-defeating, addressing a symptom and not the cause, and further entrenching misunderstandings of what racial identity is, how racism works, and when and where race matters.

Alternatively, a decolonial understanding of race tells us to focus less on race as a thing, and more on race as a *verb*, a process of becoming, of racialization that produces identities that are complicated, nuanced, and accrue meaning in dynamic fashion; for racialized experiences are not the same in all contexts, or across, or within, racial and ethnic communities, nor is their significance static across a lifetime (Puar, 2018). Indeed, racial identity for BIPoC youth is non-linear, complicated, and subtle, shaped deeply by a negotiation of their internal self-perception, and their accruing awareness of how the broader world sees them (Sanchez, et al., 2015). Far more complex than phenotype alone, racial identity for youth can also reflect issues of nationality, culture, and legal status (Gonzales, 2011; Ayón, 2016), multi-racial tensions and struggles with belonging (Bonilla-Silva, 2004), and navigation of bicultural existence (Darder, 2012). This process of racial identity formation looks different for White youth—the ubiquity of a “White Racial Frame” (DiAngelo, 2017) makes seeing the significance of their own White-racial identity difficult and can occlude the appreciation for the racialization BIPoC youth experience. Consequently, the ubiquity of racial identity, and the reality that White youth experience race as well, should not be dismissed (Matias, 2016). Essentially, race is as much a dynamic, cultural construction as it is a physiological one (Cross & Cross, 2008). This is not to dismiss the deep significance phenotype has accrued (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), but rather to note that there is more going on for BIPoC youth, and White youth, as we exist, and seek to know ourselves and our place in a racialized world (Bucholtz, 2010; Tatum, 2017).

This is extremely critical for teachers to recognize: that race matters, and accrues significance, even absent of overt racism or racial tension. As Cross (1991) describes, racial, ethnic, and cultural identity often crystalizes around an “Encounter” with the normative realities of Whiteness and White

supremacy, followed by psychological coping and internalization processes that help racialized youth locate themselves in a complicated world. Importantly, this Encounter is not always singular; it can occur as a particular, jarring instance, or as a gradual process of conscious awareness of one's racial positioning. As most youth experience it, the Encounter is not a moment of police violence but ongoing exposure to microaggressions, and subtle, cultural racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2018) that disparages one's ways of being without ever mentioning melanin. It is less likely to be experienced as overt slurs, and more likely as *covering demands* (Yoshino, 2007), a guise of welcoming language cloaking suggestions that BIPoC "cover" aspects of their cultural selves. White institutions find undesirable. In many cases, students may not be actively conscious of these Encounters as they unfold, gaslighting themselves by second-guessing their perceptions of the racial messages they hear, and engaging in "Coping" and "Internalization" processes as they are experiencing the encounter (Tatum, 2017).

All of this is to say that racial, ethnic, and cultural identity is far more complicated than we often assume, and teachers are often prepared to discuss. Common, Eurocentric understandings of race as static, and racial identity as significant only in the presence of overt racism or outright racial conflict, have a tendency to distort what racial identity really looks like for most BIPoC, warping a sense of who is implicated in discussions of race, how and why discussing race is relevant. Ultimately, this leaves many youth, whose lives and experiences might feel extremely distant from the one-dimensional constructions of an overtly oppressed person of color, outside of a conversation they desperately, critically need to take part in.

RACE, IDENTITY, & CURRICULAR SILENCE

What we are getting at here is, of course, the well-known ways in which race, and conversations about racial identity, are silenced in the curriculum. Too often, teachers are unprepared to understand, or engage with, how racial identity develops and is experienced (Branch, 2020). Feeling unequipped or unsure of what the points of entry into discussions of race might be, they simply avoid talking about race. This is perhaps most prevalent, and dangerous, in contexts where socioeconomics, demographics, or other socio-cultural factors, have created a purportedly "post-racial" environment—we are thinking here of affluent cities and suburbs, private schools, and overwhelmingly White contexts where affluence, a sense of homogeneity, and academic exceptionalism can make race seem less pressing for school staff to consider, and less intriguing for researchers who often focus on racial

struggle in marginalized contexts to examine. Far from being post-racial, contexts like these are laden with racial messaging; it is simply that those messages often insist on not speaking of race, for doing so would *be* the conflict itself. Unfortunately, this omerta does not produce the desired “post-racial,” color-blind world, for such a thing is nothing more than a fantasy (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). Race *happens*, and matters, here as well; it just looks different.

STUDENT VOICES: A NOTE ON METHODS

To help illuminate, and contextualize, our argument in this and subsequent conceptual sections of this article, we include the reflections that several student-athletes at an affluent, multicultural, private school shared around their experiences with race and the development of their racial identities.

The four student-athletes whose voices we include—all of whom, as well as teachers and others they mention, are referred to through pseudonyms—were interviewed by the researchers, one of whom was an English teacher at their school, as part of a larger study on racial discourse at their school site. These open-ended interviews were coded to identify key themes that defined these students’ daily lives, including the pervasiveness of Whiteness, a culture of negative reinforcement of racial identity among peers, and a deeply color-blind learning environment. Yet an additional round of coding revealed an important nuance in the data; even in restrictive environments, sport provided a meaningful point of entry into discussion of racial experience and identity for youth that classrooms regularly failed to offer. Our hope is that the selections from these students’ voices that we include add richness and texture to our discussion, because the urgency of our task is rooted in the lived experience of youth who desperately need meaningful entry points into conversations on race and racialization.

KEEPING IT HIDDEN

While each of the interviewees specifically expressed their appreciation for the diversity of their school, they acknowledged that this diversity was not represented in their curricular offerings or academic discussions. As Graciela, a softball player, noted, “We know it’s there, and we keep it hidden. ‘Cause again, we don’t wanna offend anyone because we don’t know where they come from.” In Graciela’s typical classroom environment, students do not discuss their own or others’ identities. Rather, she and her peers believe that doing so—simply naming that they were diverse, that BIPoC identities existed—would be offensive, disrupting the fantasy of the color-blind learning environment they were regularly presented with.

This mindset was reinforced and perpetuated by teachers who chose not to engage in discussions about race, even when canonical texts, such as *Things Fall Apart* or *The Tempest*, explicitly dealt with it. As Isabella, a volleyball player, remembers, race was a significant void in her class discussions. Even when teachers had the opportunity to engage students on the subject of race in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, she remembers thinking:

But it was just like, who was gonna speak up? I feel like if one person was to speak up, maybe everybody would be encouraged to participate, but that was never the case. Nobody ever talked about it. Mr. Schwartz would be like, ‘Oh okay, let’s move on.’ He was never in that topic for a long period of time.

Here, Isabella describes how both teachers and students shied away from topics concerning race, a cyclical, mutually reinforcing process. Seeing their hesitancy mirrored in the teacher’s discomfort and dismissiveness, no student wanted to be the first to enter the discussion, and the possibilities fell flat. From interactions like this, students quickly learn that disengaging from an important topic is allowed when it is uncomfortable.

RACE REDUCED TO TRAUMA

While this excision of race is certainly stark and problematic, it is not the only way in which race is commonly distorted in the classroom. At least equally harmful to this silence is the way in which teachers, oftentimes leveraging well-regarded texts, discuss race in flat terms, constructing BIPoC only in the context of their experiences of persecution and oppression; as nothing more than *pobrecitos*, individuals we should pity and whose lives we should lament. Graciela remembers a teacher introducing *Of Mice and Men*:

He talked about how for a Black man it’s much different than a White man... they have less authority, way less authority, and that the White man has more money and more authority over them, just because of the color of their skin... Everyone was mostly quiet when it came to that part ‘cause no one wants to hear it.

Graciela’s point that “no one wants to hear it” echoes Isabella’s discussion of discomfort, but it also speaks to what is lacking in the discussion of BIPoC characters from fictional texts or history lessons: joy, community, pride, rebellion, and resistance. As he reflected on the curriculum he saw in schools, Jayden, a basketball player, described: “They talk a lot about Blacks and how they struggled in the past with the Whites, but nobody likes to talk about how the Asians struggled or how the Mexicans struggled.” The language Jayden uses here tells us a great deal about his understanding of race. As

he understands it, learning about race simply means learning about struggle, a marginalizing, deficit view of BIPoC communities. Further, his frame of reference for racial identity has remained flat, homogenizing; his discourse notes “*the Blacks*,” “*the Asians*,” rhetorically assigning an article that condenses these multiplicitous experiences into a single comprehensible Other. After eleven years in school, this bi-racial honors student cannot conceive of a different way race can be presented and understood in humanities classes.

Jayden’s flat understanding of race in the classroom was a result of an absence of opportunities for robust discussion, for, as all four student-athletes described, their learning about race and racism was limited to discussions of the past, and stories of marginalization. Graciela noted that: “in class, we don’t normally talk about [race]. I think it’s just ‘cause it makes us nervous and it puts all of these ideas in our heads, like slavery, the border, the detention places, too, and stuff like that.” For Graciela, conversations on race equate to discussions of oppression, and nothing more. There is no opportunity to draw meaningful conclusions about the colonial roots in these systems, or to seek out hope, possibility, or positive aspects of racial identity. In fact, Graciela reflected directly on the impacts this had on the ways she and her peers engage with one another’s racial identity: “I think it’s like, if you were to talk about someone’s race, then you must be in that really dark place, because what did they ever do to you?” Graciela and her peers avoid these topics when talking to each other in the same way that their teachers and classmates avoid discussions about race; they assume that race and racism are synonymous, and even broaching the subject carries with it malicious, divisive intent.

There is something of the *White Gaze* (Morrison, 2005) present in these constructions of BIPoC as the subjects of constant trauma, their experiences existing only in some distant, abstract imaginary. When students, whether White or BIPoC, are only able to see race through a homogenizing frame of trauma and pity, BIPoC become nothing more than a zoological curiosity whose lives and stories are reduced to narratives of damage (Tuck, 2009). Rather than achieving the color-blind goal of “post-racial” community, youth are simply left confused and closeted; fearing that discussing their own, perhaps less shocking, but equally significant, experiences and identities as racialized people, will actually invite racial conflict and violence (Tatum, 2017). This complicates the racial identity development of BIPoC youth, forcing them to internalize these pathologizing messages as they attempt to reconcile the dissonance between how BIPoC are imagined and presented, and their own experiences and identities as BIPoC.

Engaging students whose racial lives and identities have had more nuance to them, solely on these terms of racial extremis and caricature, is self-defeating. Such approaches to race leave students like those we spoke to—BIPoC students, but students whose experiences were much different than the lives of persecution they were shown in the classroom and texts—out of the conversation, furthering a view of the racialized as “Other,” fetishizing racial pain and subaltern difference (Spivak, 1988), and minimizing the way positive and varied aspects of racial, ethnic, and cultural identity might be significant. By focusing only on overt racism and catastrophe, we lose an understanding of the way that racial identity is endemic in our cultural systems and structures and the ways that non-White identity can exist as something besides a pathological burden.

All of this amounts to Curricular Silence; a crushing erasure of the significance of race (even when it is present) that leaves everyone with less racial literacy, and perpetuates a White cultural frame that dehumanizes all involved. By either avoiding the conversation altogether, or ignoring more subtle realities of racial experience, both BIPoC students and White students are deprived of the opportunity to account, in supported, productive ways, with their own relationships to race and inequity in an increasingly diverse, complex world.

TALKING & READING COMPLEX NOTIONS OF RACE IN THE CLASSROOM

Yet there are ways to disrupt Curricular Silencing. While there is a consensus that much more needs to be done to explore and understand how best to guide conversations around race in the classroom (Bolgatz, 2005; Brown, et al., 2017), it is clear that these conversations matter. When teachers do engage in direct conversations about race and racial identity, research suggests that they are fulfilling a deeply felt need and desire by students who are eager to discuss race and racism in an academic context (Roberts, et al., 2008). Particularly in school settings like the one we discuss, students see school as a place to make sense of complicated ideas and want race included in this context.

However, achieving this becomes difficult given that 83% of U.S. teachers are White women, shaped by their own schooling experiences which likely left them with limited understandings of race, framed within a color-blind ideology (Borsheim-Black, 2015; Matias & Mackey, 2016; Pettigrew, 2012). As such, it is far too common for these teachers to be ill-equipped at guiding these conversations, or aware of the complexity of racial identity development their students might be experiencing (Castro, et al., 2015). Nevertheless, even teachers with limited or developing understandings can create space in the classroom for more nuanced, generative conversations about

race by fostering an environment of trust, building strong relationships, and opening themselves, and their curriculum to direct discussions of race and racial identity (Bolgatz, 2005). Such work can allow for the development of counter-spaces that allow students to engage in consistent critical dialogue which identifies and problematizes racialized moments in the curriculum, amplifying counter-narratives (e.g., Solorzano & Yosso, 2002) which “acknowledge varied racial experiences and knowledge” (Castro, et al., 2015).

Further, it is clear that YA literature is more than capable of encouraging meaningful engagement with such counter-narratives around race (Hughes-Hassell, 2013). In ideal circumstances, texts like Myers’s *Monster*, Thomas’s *The Hate You Give*, Reynolds’s *Long Way Down*, Stone’s *Dear Martin*, or many other rich YA texts from authors of color provide fascinating windows into the experiences of BIPoC, creating opportunities for young readers to explore a story “counter” to the normative ones often told about BIPoC. Yet while we advocate for teachers to take this task on, we are also cautious of the conceptual readiness students might have for such storylines. In essence, for many students, like those whose voices we include here, conversations on the topic of race have been so stifled that the texts they are exposed to act, not as mirrors or windows (e.g., Clark & Blackburn, 2009) into compelling counter-narratives, but as something altogether different; they become warped binoculars that peer at worlds so completely distant and foreign to their own they are almost incomprehensible.

This is not to say texts like these *themselves* advance shallow or flat notions of racial identity but, rather, as we have noted, too often, racial trauma and “Other-ness” is all they are read for. When this occurs, these texts meant to help us better engage with race can, ironically, work in reverse. Read carelessly, the ubiquity, nuance, and universality of *having* a racialized experience (i.e. that everyone, including White folks, lived racialized lives) is lost, leaving behind only a surreal caricature, and students—even BIPoC students themselves—are asked to look, with a voyeuristic, White Gaze, upon the tragedy of race, a subaltern thing that happens *elsewhere*. Surely, pedagogy is responsible for many of these missteps. Yet it behooves us to acknowledge that in many cases, not all students and teachers—particularly those in affluent and predominantly White contexts—are prepared to leap into the “deep end” of racialized discussion, easily consuming and processing, for instance, Reynolds and Kendi’s *Stamped: Remix* (2020). This is not at all a call to neglect the urgency of having challenging conversations but, rather, to appreciate that if we want conversations to be robust and sustained—and our best anti-racist impacts will occur if conversations *keep going*, becoming normalized parts of life

and learning—we need to reflect on how we invite participants into them, where they are at when we begin, and what their cultural context and experience with the conversation might be, for our cultural context deeply shapes our ways of learning (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003).

When issues of race are framed through texts so far beyond the context of cultural worlds that are comprehensible to students, and the predominantly White teachers who teach about them, we leave students' zone of proximal development (e.g. Wertsch, 1984) for entering into this conversation on race, racism, and racial identity far behind. Just as with the exploration of any complicated concept, scaffolding and context matter, and leaping into a conversation at a level of intensity students are not ready for risks pushing individuals out of the discussion altogether (Tatum, 2017) or furthering the curricular silencing that comes from unintentionally constructing racial identity as nothing more than trauma and catastrophe.

We cannot stress enough that our argument here is *not* that youth are not ready or able to talk about race: unequivocally, they are. As we have noted, racial identity is complex, nuanced, and ubiquitous. Youth are experiencing, and sharply aware of race and racial identity at increasingly young ages (Tatum, 2017). They are ready and capable of discussing race in profound and articulate ways, just caught up by the curricular silence that coloniality creates. Rather, what we are attempting to be conscious of, as we reflect on the experiences and voices of our student interviewees, is the complexity of navigating these conversations and the damage and difficulty of raising issues of racial identity in nuanced ways. We must find ways to invite students into discussions of race in multifaceted ways that disrupt Eurocentric, static notions of racial essentialism and problematic depictions of BIPoC as existing only in trauma narratives. While some teachers and students in some contexts are ready for intense work immediately, with texts like those mentioned above, our work in schools has shown us this is not universally the case. Teachers and students in some contexts where Whiteness, Eurocentrism, and racial identity function differently—and have, perhaps, had a more entrenched grip—need different angles of approach, different invitations and points of entry that can help students and teachers move past curricular silence and into meaningful conversations on the nuances of racial identity and less extreme forms of racializing pressure.

With this in mind, we argue a powerful way to accomplish this task, particularly in settings like these, without losing the urgency or depth of rigor in the conversation, is to find ways to anchor our entry points in social and cultural practices that have meaning and substance to them and to the community. Essentially, scaffolding conversations around race and racial identity with texts that invite

them to see race in less static terms, and appreciate the more nuanced story of race, through cultural practices they are familiar, comfortable, and engaged with. Sport, of course, is a cultural venue in which this might be accomplished.

THE INEXTRICABLE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RACE & SPORTS

Often, sport is viewed and understood—particularly in schools—in functionalist ways: as an apolitical, neutral, character-building activity that “transcends” difference (Coakley, 1997, 2011; Sierlecki, 2014). Yet such constructions of sport are anything but neutral. Sport, in this supposedly color-blind, functionalist guise, represents the continuation of a longstanding history of using athletics as part of the colonial project (Hylton, 2009; King, et al., 2007). This is reflected in the way sports was used to, among other things, “assimilate” global south cultures and prove White dominance (Stoddart, 2004), replicate binary gender roles and misogyny (Van Sterkenburg & Knoppers 2004), and the more modern ways in which White league executives, coaches, and politicians have sought to stifle protest by communities of color, while advancing state-sanctioned patriotic displays (Bryant, 2019; Hawkman, 2019; Khan, 2014).

While these attempts to minimize the significance of race, and validate White, Eurocentric ideas and institutions through sport have persisted, the unique, powerful nature of athletics has allowed BIPoC athletes to continually disrupt this colonial imposition and leverage sport, both within and beyond school institutions, to express ingenuity and identity (Carrington, 2010; Mahiri, 1998). The less restrictive nature of the field of play allowed BIPoC communities to transform games in their own image (Boyd, 1997; Lewis, 2010) and push back on cultural erasure, marginalization, and the ways in which classroom spaces limit explorations of cultural identity (Anderson, 20016; Domínguez, 2018). In short, not only is sport culturally ubiquitous, but the presence of race within sport is equally ubiquitous—despite the constant attempts to stifle it, race, ethnicity, and culture have remained significant and *present* in the everyday cultural world of sport. This allows sport to be a space for youth—BIPoC or White—to engage in meaningful negotiation of their racial identities, a space in which to acknowledge and be transparent about cultural processes of racialization, without this development becoming tangled up in Eurocentric silencing and an omerta on race-talk in the same ways that occur in the classroom.

SPORT AS ENTRY POINT TO DIALOGUE

Turning again to our student-athletes, Graciela reflected:

[Our team is] all Mexican... and we know what to talk about from there, we joke around...we have a lot to do with our music too... we can communicate with each other in Spanish sometimes and there's some funny jokes in there too.

Graciela connects with her softball teammates not just through their sport, but through their shared culture, adding an additional layer to the closeness they develop as teammates. Without having to translate their language or censor their jokes, they're able to connect with one another over their shared experiences. Roberts (2008) argues that the role of humor in shifting offensive stereotypes into meaningful connections with people in a shared cultural group allows youth to destigmatize stereotypes and render formerly offensive beliefs as less powerful. Alex, a swimmer and water polo player, shares a similar experience with her teammates:

I think we're just comfortable with each other... we will stereotype some things when we're making fun of each other, playfully, but...we laugh it off. I don't think it really offends any of us. We're at a point where it's not rude to. If we were strangers, I'd be like, "Excuse me?"

Alex acknowledges that she has reserved the ability to joke about her identity for her teammates. It is in the cultural context of sport, where no pretense of racial color-blindness exists, that she is able to grant this exclusive permission, and experiment with her racialized identity in a group that shares common language, rituals, and goals. In fact, she later shared that her teammates use their understanding about race and their sport to reflect on their opponents and her own identity:

Well, like for water polo, it's very... and swim, it's very common for a lot of, um, White people. You don't really see much color... It also depends on the school. If Bayview comes over, they're all, it's all White and we're like, "Wow.... They must be good at swimming." [Our team is] mostly Mexican but I don't really feel alienated there, I'm included and even people that aren't Mexican, we're... We all just kinda bond together. We don't ever really struggle with race.

While Alex and her teammates are operating under the false, colonial, scientific-racist assumption that White people are genetically better at swimming, she and her teammates still acknowledge the presence of race in a way that is not present in her classroom. She identifies as Asian and sees her teammates' Mexican identities as a positive opportunity to bond together as BIPoC, a stark contrast to Graciela's earlier point about diversity in the classroom as a hindrance to class discussion for fear of offending classmates of different races and ethnicities.

Extending from this, when we consider how central sports are to the identities of youth, and how widely sports are played, watched, and enjoyed—whether in official or unofficial capacities—it becomes clear that sports is in fact a realm in which youth can draw considerable funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2006). Even if the sports they participate in vary, youth understand sports. Athletics and gameplay are lenses through which they see and relate to the world. They are able to locate themselves as athletes and fans and use this positionality to orient themselves in a broader, more complicated social and cultural landscape.

Jayden illustrates this with his sport as he discusses the mentorship role the coaches play in his life:

So basketball is definitely what we're trying to do. But I think basketball definitely takes a step back when it becomes like them talking to us about growing up as good people in the world and being smart, being intelligent and socially aware, all that stuff.

Jayden sees the larger scope of his participation in sports as contributing to his social awareness and cultural intelligence. Skills cultivated in team practice, pep talks, coaching sessions, study halls, and even free time on the bus are skills of equal significance to the layups and jump shots they are perfecting. They are the skills that become the lasting lessons he will take with him when he is no longer playing for his school.

Moreover, what sports has provided for Jayden is a space of authentic community. He provides this example of the way he and his teammates mentor and encourage one another:

But the best thing is that when you find when you could talk to peers in a high-level way, about either if you're talking about your future, or emotional trauma, or whatever, like the comfortability, being able to come to a guy like that and have that type of conversation with a guy is very... It helps a lot with the connectivity of each other.

It is important that Jayden uses the phrase “high-level” to describe these conversations with his teammates, because it is the same type of conversations teachers try to emulate in their academic discussions. This is a context in which we can find comfort in the uncomfortable; a space to explore difficult moments and experiences, and support one another through them. Jayden and his teammates are not only ready for those difficult discussions about race, they have been living them, practicing them in the context of the court. With the right conditions, they can carry these conversations into their classrooms, and past the ideology of cultural silencing that normally marks these spaces.

Sport is a deeply layered cultural activity in our students' lives; one upon which literacy teachers should draw in our efforts to help students make sense of the world. It is not that sport is some apolitical thing that transcends difference, but rather, sport is a culturally *dense* activity in which difference matters, carries significance, and can be negotiated in positive terms. Sport is, and can be, a space in which to extend meaningful, accessible invitations for students to consider the ubiquity of racialized experience.

COMPLEX REPRESENTATIONS OF RACE AND SPORT IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

So where does sports-related YA literature fit into this conceptual landscape? As we have argued, engaging all students in critical conversations around race requires (a) appreciating the nuance and complexity of racial identity and (b) providing accessible invitations into these conversations for teacher's abilities and students' context. With this in mind, by situating conversations of race in the cultural practice of sports, we open the possibility to acknowledge nuance in racial identity formation and embed these conversations into relatable contexts. In schools, athletics regularly provides space for BIPoC to engage in meaningful literacy practice (Morrell, 2004; Mahiri, 1998), a "fund" of knowledge that might be leveraged, in concert with YA texts that sit at the intersection of sports and race, to create points of entry into discussion of race and racialization.

While we do not understand sport as a neutral, apolitical activity that "erases" difference in some way, its immense role in our culture means that it is something that nearly all youth engage with and experience. Thus, texts that center sport as the terrain in which a character negotiates racial identity become an excellent way in which we might engage students to discuss, appreciate, and seek to understand how divergent racial experiences impact their own lives. In the remainder of this article, we offer analyses of the ways that three sports-related YA texts might be read through a decolonial lens, analyzing ways that complex notions of race, ethnicity, and culture are presented, and might be leveraged in classroom spaces, to provide invitations to difficult, but urgent conversations.

The focal texts we have selected to explore these possibilities are populated by complex, nuanced BIPoC protagonists. Moreover, each of the texts we have chosen also involves situations, settings, and protagonists who, like the students whose voices frame this piece, participate in sports and school in largely White contexts. Essentially, they are all texts that present racial identity in

compelling ways that will resonate in schooling contexts in which Whiteness is dominant, and pushing discussions of race involves navigating deeply socialized student discomfort. In Sherman Alexie's (2007) *Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Junior, a first-nations youth living on the Spokane reservation, finds himself navigating his home community, and the White context of Reardan High School, which he attends for the greater academic and athletic opportunities. In Matt de la Peña's (2008) *Mexican Whiteboy*, Danny Lopez, a multi-racial baseball player and student at predominantly White private school Leucadia Prep, spends his summer with his Mexican cousins, exploring his identity while developing his game. Finally, *Dragon Hoops*, by Gene Luen Yang (2020), is a graphic retelling of the diverse Bishop O'Dowd basketball team's run to the California state basketball title while representing an elite Catholic School whose student body is predominantly White. We have included this memoir, along with two works of fiction, for two reasons; first, because different types of literature will be needed and of interest in classrooms around different objectives and standards, and second, to acknowledge that sometimes, a factual story of racial experience may be valuable in anchoring discussions that could be brushed off as fictional. Finally, Our analyses of these texts follow from our initial research question—How can depictions of sport and young athlete's experiences in YA literature create inviting spaces through which to open conversations around the complexity and ubiquity of racial identity and experience?—and point to the ways in which these texts depict complicated aspects of racial identity, awareness, and racialization that are incredibly common to student readers in the secondary English classroom.

SEEING RACE ON THE FIELD/COURT

We begin by considering how our focal texts do something that is simple but incredibly important: locate race as a constant, real, and natural thing. Too often, color-blind ideologies—like those our student-athletes described—encourage students and teachers to not speak of race or pretend it does not exist, minimizing the social and material consequences of race and adding difficulty to students' development of a healthy racial identity. But as our student-athletes note, these prohibitions often erode in the context of athletics. We do see race in sport, and this reality, woven into the curriculum, can be a way to make race more accessible in classroom discourse.

In *Mexican Whiteboy*, race is constantly present in Danny and Uno's perceptions of the world around them—much as it is for our students. In our introduction to Danny, as he sees neighborhood youth playing stickball, names this ever-present reality, even as he reacts to the call of the baseball diamond:

His pitching arm starts to tingle, his right elbow and fingertips, like he's already gripping the seams of a baseball—a Pavlovian response, he thinks, recalling his psych teacher's chicken-scratch scrawl on the chalkboard. The guys playing stickball are all Mexican except the one waving the bat around—he's black. Danny watches one of the Mexican kids lob a meatball down the middle and the black kid smack it over the roof of the house. Watches everybody react. Start dancing around, showing off. (p. 4)

The moment here is subtle but important. Danny's focus is on the game, but he *sees* that most of the players are Mexican, that one is Black. He is our guide and protagonist, and this *seeing* is made to feel normal; color-blindness is rejected as Danny recognizes how phenotype is pertinent, present in his view of things. This normalization is a critical invitation into normalizing conversations around race a reader might have; allowing them to permit themselves to reflect on race as a meaningful category, something present in their lives. Rather than race being positioned as something dangerous, tragic to point out, it simply *is*.

A similar moment occurs in *Dragon Hoops* as the team travels from their home in Oakland, California, to Missouri for a tournament. Here, the majority BIPOC players encounter a markedly different demographic, and name it as such, a moment Yang captures in the banter between Jeevin Sandhu, a Punjabi athlete, and Mikey, the sole White player on the team:

“Man, them's some real white people! They look like something out of a movie!”

“Not like you Mikey. Ha ha!”

“Hey I'm white! I'm hella white! I go hunting and fishing and mudding and all that stuff! I'm like, redneck white!”

“True, true.” (p. 272)

Here again, race is a thing that is noticed, felt, experienced, and discussed; not as history or marginalization, but as a reality of our lives. This not only normalizes conversation around race—a critical first step in classrooms where cultural silence has been stark—but it opens opportunities to tease out how these characters, and students reading them, are seeing and defining race not just by phenotype. Here, race becomes something cultural, something one claims and performs, “real” Whiteness being an assemblage of practices as well as a phenotype. Read as curriculum, this not only validates and normalizes the reality of seeing racial identity—not as limiting characters, but that it is present as a facet of life—but also invites the reader to reflect on and explore their own assumptions of racial essentialism, and race itself. If we can joke about “real” whiteness, what do we

as readers think of that notion? How might it be applied elsewhere, in and on other communities? Or disrupted?

EXPLORING RACE BEYOND PHENOTYPE

While normalizing the presence of racial conversation—and inviting us to feel normal in having these observations as well—is a critical part of these texts, so too is the way that race is not constructed simply in essential, flat terms. In *Absolutely True Diary*, Junior struggles constantly with these tensions, and what it means to be a “real” Indian. When he describes his first day at Reardan, he describes how he felt: “And once I arrived at Reardan, I became something less than Indian./ Those white kids did not talk to me./ They barely looked at me” (p. 83). Rather than engaging with their new classmate, Junior’s peers rendered him invisible. This treatment is the result of color-blind schooling environments; when noticing and acknowledging a person’s race is considered rude, the effect is simply further marginalization. Junior’s reflection gives us the opportunity to consider racial marginalization and racial identity in public spaces, not as a constant experience of overt oppression, but in its nuance. We are invited into a conversation on the mundane ways racism, and color-blind erasure, impact how BIPoC youth experience racialization. Junior’s reflection about his identity continues to grow in its complexity as the school year continues:

Traveling between Reardan and Wellpinit, between the little white town and the reservation, I always felt like a stranger./ I was half Indian in one place and half white in the other./ It was like being Indian was my job, but it was only a part-time job. And it didn’t pay well at all. (p. 118)

Alexie’s portrait of Junior allows us to see that this young man is dealing not just with general adolescent questions of becoming, but a fluid racial, ethnic, and cultural identity as well. We are invited into a conversation around how, and why, context shaped racial interpellation and experience; a conversation into how others’ expectations and perceptions were equally at play in his racialization as his own sense of self.

Turning to *Mexican Whiteboy*, we can consider further ways these texts create complex depictions of race as a verb, a thing that *happens* and is *happening*. After playing and striking out an athlete from another neighborhood, Danny encounters a group of Mexican girls whose interaction with him illuminates the complexity of what racial, ethnic, and cultural identity involves:

Danny's not over there for two minutes before the three girls walk over and start talking to him in Spanish. When he shrugs they giggle. "He doesn't even speak Spanish," one of them says. "Told you he was a halfie. You could tell 'cause how he dresses."

"Why don't you speak no Spanish?" another says.

Danny shrugs.

"*Tu Mexicano*, though right?" the first one says.

Danny nods. (p. 152-3)

This is a running theme throughout the text; Danny is Mexican, but he is biracial, with a White mother. In this moment on the pitching mound, he is confounded by his lack of Spanish, a tension that leaves him in between worlds. As he reflects earlier:

He's Mexican because his family's Mexican, but he's not really Mexican. His skin is dark like his grandma's sweet coffee, but his insides are as pale as the cream she mixes in.

Danny holds the pencil above the paper, thinking: I'm a white boy among Mexicans, and a Mexican among white boys. (p. 90)

Moments like these invite us to consider the socially constructed aspects of race, without dismissing the social and material consequences of racialization. We are invited to ask: is it his melanated skin and ancestry that make him Mexican? Or is it the cultural practices of these communities, his Spanish tongue? How do these pressures change as we move across contexts, as they do for Danny, who feels equally out of place with his Mexican cousins in National City, CA, as he does at his affluent, White school, Leucadia Prep. Throughout the text, Danny struggles with these tensions but consistently names them, leaning into baseball as a way to navigate them, and inviting us to continue, along with him, interrogating what race is, what belonging is, and how it is contextual and performed.

NEW RACISM IN ATHLETIC CONTEXTS

As we have argued, one of the most important aspects of racialization—and one most often neglected in classroom discussions of racism that frame it in terms of overt discrimination and violence—is the way racism has evolved. For most students, it is unlikely their experiences will be marked by outright, overt racism. This creates a conundrum, as youth are Other-ed, yet often unable to name what they are experiencing because it feels so different from the definition of racism they have been given. Navigating and making sense of these subtle forms of racism, without seeing their experiences of them minimized, is a challenge.

In our focal texts, authors use their BIPoC as opportunities to name and illuminate these subtler forms of racism—creating a textured reality upon which further conversation might build. For instance, in *Dragon Hoops*, while traveling with the team, Chinese American author/character Gene captures a subtle moment of microaggressions, “stunning encounters with racism unnoticed by the majority group” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 151): “You a parent? Was that your kid up ahead?” a White stadium employee asks Yang, “He means Alex” (p. 216), Yang tells the reader, referring to the only Asian player on the team. This seems such a small moment, but one the text takes the time to point out; signaling the impact and significance of this interpellation and racial weight, even in its casualness. As readers, we are given the opportunity then, to consider why this moment matters to Yang, and the stifling impact it might have had. The effect grows as this same encounter is repeated later in the text, this time while watching a game, when a White fan says to Yang, “Your son is doing great!” “Oh, he’s ...Uh. Thanks” (p. 392), Yang replies, depicting a sensation certainly common to BIPoC students, of simply accepting the racial interpellation; permitting the ongoing oppression through assent.

Yang offers little commentary on these moments himself as narrator, yet by including and highlighting them, and the way they impact but do not define him, he gives us the opportunity to consider this form of racism. He locates moments like these as real, common, and significant to the narrative and experience of BIPoC individuals without defining their lives. Elsewhere, Yang describes the performative, orientalist bow the team takes up as a way to celebrate Alex. Like the Alex we interviewed above, this racial-joking is shown to be a positive team development, a way to appreciate textual-Alex’s—who had long been on the social periphery of the team—unique racial identity and include him. But Yang also notes of this celebration: “Culturally insensitive? Maybe” (p. 326), once again ensuring we reflect on this complexity. We see race in sport, affirming it, normalizing its presence, sometimes joking about it as a form of bonding. But what other substance is there to that?

No, neither the mistaking of Yang as Alex’s father or the team tribute are malicious, nor are they depicted as such. But by ensuring we attend to them—highlighting these complex moments amidst far more exciting events in the narrative—we are asked to consider why they might still matter, and what they mean. Attending to these moments extends an invitation into a discussion of the casual racial discrimination BIPoC youth and peoples are far more likely to see and experience in schools.

Similar to microaggressions, covering demands (Yoshino, 2006)—attempts to insist that BIPoC individuals are welcome, so long as they do not display undesirable cultural traits—are rampant in school contexts but often unacknowledged or discussed. Our focal texts, however, provide compelling points of entry into discussions of these tensions. In *Absolutely True Diary*, Junior writes a comic, “How to Pretend You’re Not Poor,” and shares his strategies to meet the covering demands he faced when taking his White girlfriend to a formal dance:

No lunch money?: “I’m not hungry anyway”

Field trip? School dance?: “I can’t make it... year, I’m really sick... cough cough...”

Bake sale?: “Looks yummy but NATIVE AMERICANS are allergic to sugar...”

Everyone has the latest iPod?: “I’m OLD SCHOOL” (Junior is listening to The Ramones on vinyl)

A good all-purpose excuse: “There’s an INDIAN ceremony at home...” (p. 120)

Junior’s comic, paired with his active navigation of encounters just like these throughout the text, including while playing basketball, help us appreciate the way that BIPoC must navigate White, affluent cultural worlds—at once cloaking their racial marginalization, and trafficking in it—“There’s an INDIAN ceremony at home”—as a means of coping with a color-blind world. This opens invitations for the reader into the consideration of our own assumptions and expectations, and the ways we expect normative compliance with White culture, and the way curricular and cultural silencing press BIPoC to keep aspects of their racial identities, their experiences, and their marginalization hidden so as not to be further marginalized, or defined by that marginalization.

COURAGEOUS CONFRONTATIONS WITH RACISM

Achieving anti-racism, we are regularly told, begins with courageous conversations about race; accepting our complicity in institutions and practices that reflect systemic racism. In contrast to shallow narratives of racism as only overt, and racists as pantomime villains, our focal texts actually present compelling images of what these courageous conversations can look like, making anti-racist action possible, and accessible. In *Absolutely True Diary*, an incident of frustration and intergenerational tension—finding his mother’s name in a textbook—Junior experiences with Mr. P, a White teacher, leads to a surprisingly honest reflection on racism and accountability, as Mr. P reacts to being hit with a book Junior has thrown:

“When I first started teaching here, that’s what we did to the rowdy ones, you know? We beat them. That’s how we were taught to teach you. We were supposed to kill the Indian to save the child.”

“You *killed* Indians?”

“No, no, it’s just a saying. I didn’t literally kill Indians. We were supposed to make you give up being Indian. Your songs and stories and language and dancing. Everything. We weren’t trying to kill Indian people. We were trying to kill Indian culture.”

Man, at that second, I hated Mr. P *hard*. I wished I had a whole dang set of encyclopedias to throw at him.

“I can’t apologize to everybody I hurt,” Mr. P said. “But I can apologize to you.”

It was so backward. I’d broken *his* nose but he was trying to apologize *to me*. (p. 35)

Mr. P’s apology and discussion of past injustice keeps us as readers engaged with a dynamic notion of race-as-cultural as well as phenotype. Here we have an explanation of cultural racism—cloaking racial bias in condemnation of certain cultural traits or qualities, instead of directing it at a skin color (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). But most importantly, Mr. P shows us how to embrace, and normalize, a discussion of one’s participation with racism without it devolving into shame, guilt, or defensiveness. He is clear and honest about his past missteps, owning his participation in racism and the legacy and impact of this. But rather than devolve into self-centered catharsis, Mr. P is shown to critically engage in what he can do to act now in ways that break such systemic biases, how he can support Junior as a debt owed.

In a similar moment, Yang recounts a conversation he has with Coach Lou, a Black man, about the growth and development Alex Zhao—the Chinese student-athlete—has made over the course of the season:

“Ey Zhao looked nice tonight didn’t he, Yang-man?” Coach Lou begins.

“His three-point shot got real pretty.” Yang replies.

“I gotta wonder though...I used to pull him out for every little mistake. I thought I was teaching him discipline. But was it ‘cause he’s Asian? Would I have to let him play through if he were a black kid or a white kid?”

“I doubt Alex sees it like that.”

“We all got our biases, Yang-man.” Coach Lou concludes. (p. 376)

This is not a conversation about a single event, or injury, but a pattern; a reflection on socialization, racism, and the ways it seeps out over time, even for BIPoC. To admit such a thing is, like Mr. P's statement earlier, a courageous thing; a statement of ownership for the malignancy of racism, and our inevitable participation in it, as well as the way it appears, and manifests, in our shared cultural worlds, in the 'neutral' terrain of sport.

Coach Lou's reflection here, "We all got our biases," is not the only instance of a courageous engagement with more systemic racism. So too is Lou's reflection on the racial bias his own coach, Coach Phelps may have shown (p. 136). Just as important as nuanced, multidimensional depictions of BIPoC characters, students need the opportunity to see, and understand, nuanced pictures of, essentially, racists. Too often, as is critically apparent in the current moment, driven by aversive racism—a desperate fear to not be seen as racist—perpetrators of racial injury fall back on defensiveness, and shallow apologies that "they (individually) aren't racist!" misunderstanding what racism is and its endemic ubiquity. What makes these texts exceptional is that they do not shy away from productive ownership of bias. Mr. P and Coach Lou are not villains. They are complex characters whose actions we can, throughout the text, connect with and relate to. They are supportive participants in sports we love. They are not engaged in cartoonish, racial assaults on BIPoC youth. Thus, the narratives of the texts do not dwell on, or risk descending into, readings that focus solely on marginalization and *pobrecito* positioning of BIPoC. These characters lean into their own limitations, their biases, demonstrating that doing so, accounting for and accepting where they might have caused harm, how it might show up in school and sport, is the courageous action; a normalized part of life in a society where racialization is part of our existence. Rather than shallow apologies for *an* action, we see reflective engagement with systemic patterns and practices; modeling what the beginnings of anti-racist conversation might involve.

FINDING AUTHENTIC IDENTITY IN SPORT

While these nuanced engagements with forms of racism are incredibly important, the most critical element that we believe is present in these texts, with their intersection of sports and racial identity, is that they provide rich depictions of a cultural context in which positive racial identity can be embraced. In *Mexican Whiteboy*, both Danny, and his best friend, bi-racial Uno, struggle with their identities, the tensions of bi-racial, bi-cultural existence. Uno describes this as being, "stuck in the middle. One pulling his left arm, the other pulling his right. Like it's some kind of tug-of-war between black and Mexican, and he's the rope" (p. 38), and Danny "never goes too long" (p. 84)

without reflecting on why he froze during Leucadia Prep's baseball tryouts, when in the more comfortable cultural setting of National City he can excel. Yet after a summer of struggles through these questions, Danny finds himself, with Uno as catcher, pitching against Leucadia's star player:

Danny digs into the dirt, considers where he's at: Leucadia Prep's perfect mound, facing Leucadia Prep's best hitter, in front of Leucadia Prep's head coach. The guy who cut him. And he needs one more strike. Just threw his best pitch and Kyle still touched it. He looks at Kyle, sees the smile on his face. And Danny smiles too. If only on the inside. Because this is so much fun. Pitching to Kyle. Pitching to Uno. Pitching when almost everything else in life is so hard to figure out. But not this. This is just a game. Two guys with smiles trying to get the better of each other. This is simple. This makes sense. This is what he loves. (p. 234)

Here is the culmination of Danny's identity struggles. In school he has had to grapple with his bi-cultural life, but in sport he is able to claim, to own, a stable, confident identity by accepting these facets of himself. Where he previously described his existence in the Leucadia community as being an unseen "ghost," his summer of embracing his racial identity, his roots, has positioned him to now be seen, owning his identity, and doing so in the context of sport. After this game, Danny and Uno reflect on their futures, with Danny committing himself to embracing his Mexican father's family and culture as his own, to seeing Liberty, his monolingual, Spanish-speaking love interest again. It is through the process of sport that Danny is able to negotiate and make sense of his conflicting feelings; it is a cultural practice in which racial identity can exist alongside stability and confidence.

An even more direct, nuanced display of authentic racial identity presents itself in *Absolutely True Diary*, during a pivotal basketball game between Reardan and the reservation school. Junior finds himself guarding his childhood best friend and now rival, Rowdy, after months spent trying to navigate the pressures and realities of his dual-existence. As the game unfolds, he narrates:

I knew he'd fly into the air about five feet from the hoop. I knew he'd jump about two feet higher than I could. So I needed to jump quicker.

And Rowdy rose into the air. And I rose with him.

AND THEN I ROSE ABOVE HIM!

Yep, if I believed in magic, in ghosts, then I think maybe I was rising on the shoulders of my dead grandmother and Eugene, my dad's best friend. Or maybe I was rising on my mother and father's hopes for me. (p. 193)

In this crucial moment, Junior reflects directly on the role that his heritage, ancestors, and culture have played in not just his success in this moment, this game, but his developing racial identity as an Indian athlete. His coping and internalization of a native identity crystallize as a powerful, positive driving force in his success on the court—he rises by embracing his cultural "baggage," not blinding himself to its existence. Racial identity, then, isn't something left behind, discarded for success in color-blind spaces, but constructed in decolonizing terms as a source of strength and resiliency on the court. For readers, here is a picture of race *matter*ing in that most relatable, and important, space of sport: as being something worth engaging with, reflecting on, and considering as a compelling aspect of our identity.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

There are, of course, more to these texts than we have been able to discuss here, including other accessible, meaningful invitations into nuanced, rich understandings of racial identity as a meaningful, present thing—for instance, the fascinating, humanizing depiction of Jeevin Sandhu's Punjabi identity and how it helps him on the court in *Dragon Hoops*. And beyond this, each contains, as well as these nuanced, gradual engagements with race and racism, more blatant examples of racial confrontation—Junior's arrival at Reardan and confrontation with Roger; Uno and Barker's racially charged fight, for example. All this being said, these texts are not perfect, and in some cases, allow sport to breeze over racial difference. If we are to encourage educators to use these texts as more accessible entry-points in discussing race, it remains important that they guard themselves against their own misinformation concerning race and engage in pedagogy that does not further allow race and racial identity to be disconnected from students' lives (Castro et al., 2015).

Nevertheless, sports matter as a critical entry point to conversations on race in the English language arts classroom. As a profoundly ubiquitous and important venue of cultural life, we cannot write sports off as superfluous to the profound questions of our time; most notably questions of race, racism, racial identity, and oppression. That these texts involve sport isn't incidental here—it is expressly because of the nature of sport, the opportunities to seek out authentic versions of oneself in the field of play, to be honest about our experiences and, in community with our teammates, pursue meaningful goals in a diverse setting—that we are able to get at, expose, and examine these things at far more robust, rich, and critical levels than narratives of trauma and catastrophe might succeed in doing. The cultural context of sport situates these issues at a level consistent with the

preparation and development of many youth, providing the transitional space they need to engage with questions of race, racism, and racial identity in the complex, decolonial ways that are so urgently needed.

Rather than approaching race bluntly, in a head-on confrontation with the topic that might go awry in some classroom contexts, falling prey to flattening and the White Gaze, reinforcing race as nothing more than marginalization or a solely negative aspect of BIPoC identity, and thus further limiting students' racial identities and literacy, these texts provide accessible invitations to normalize complex, nuanced discussions and understandings of race. By couching the depictions, explorations, and developments around characters' racial identities and worlds in the accessible, comfortable setting of sport, these texts make *talking* race more possible, more normal. The effect is important: you are reading about sports and athletes' relatable experiences on the field or court but in so doing are invited to interrogate compelling questions of race and racial identity in critical, anti-racist ways.

This is not to say the texts do this alone and without the intentional work of educators. Undoing such silence, and the broader cultural omerta surrounding discussion of race, requires *decolonial* action. Our pedagogies, our curriculums, should—must—allow students and educators to grapple openly with questions of race, racism, and oppression. It is in giving attention to these realities that progress towards anti-racism might be made. Yet how we do so matters. We cannot account for identity in a vacuum, for it is a task done in situ, through cultural practices, and in relation to the context in which we live, learn, and grow. Different settings require different invitations, lest the conversation itself become inaccessible to students, setting us backward in our attempts at racial progress. But by attending to race in these sports-centric texts, educators can, in some cases, achieve more to engage students in conversation on racial identity, succeeding in breaking down curricular silence through subversive action.

Across school settings, but particularly in contexts where Whiteness and curricular silencing around race have a firm grip—where the message and socialization has long been that even speaking of race is racist—consideration for the medium through which we facilitate our conversations about race in the curriculum is nearly as important as the conversation itself. Sport is, more often than not, one of those significant crucibles of identity teachers might leverage to invite these critical conversations into students' lives and allow all students to begin discussing and accounting for racial identity in ways that humanize and honor the complexity of the process, the layered dimensions of

racial identity and the resiliency and strength found—in equal measure to trauma—in the communities and racial identities of BIPoC.

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