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# Teaching Social Justice through Young Adult Literature

JACQUELINE N. GLASGOW

**H**ow might we nurture the prizing of differences in race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, and language? We must create for students democratic and critical spaces that foster meaningful and transformative learning. If we expect students to take social responsibility, they must explore ideas, topics, and viewpoints that not only reinforce but challenge their own. In an increasingly abrasive and polarized American society, social justice education has the potential to prepare citizens who are sophisticated in their understanding of diversity and group interaction, able to critically evaluate social institutions, and

committed to working democratically with diverse others. Young adult literature provides a context for students to become conscious of their operating world view and to examine critically alternative ways of understanding the world and social relations. As Roderick McGillis suggests, "Teaching children to read for the ideological assumptions of any book is important if we believe in knowing how our culture works upon us . . . it is important if we wish them to be informed and independent citizens" (128).

How do we evaluate books across cultures? How do we balance all the demands of literary quality and popular appeal, intellectual freedom, curriculum support, and multiculturalism? How do we make kids want to read? In *Against Borders*, Hazel Rochman says in promoting books for young people, "We have to resist the extremes: the mindless conformity to the political correctness of multiculturalism but also the backlash" (18). While it's insulting to say that a book is good *because* it's multicultural, it's also insulting not to consider other criteria for book selection. As Rochman says, "Racism dehumanizes, but a good story defeats the stereotype" (19). A good book can help to break down those barriers. According to Rochman, "Books can make a difference in dispelling prejudice and building com-

munity; not with role models and literal recipes, not with noble messages about the human family, but with enthralling stories that make us imagine the lives of others" (19). She tells us that a good story allows us to see people as individuals in all their complexity. Once we see someone as a person in all their humanity, then we've reached beyond the stereotype. Good books unsettle us, make us ask questions about what we thought was certain; they don't just reaffirm everything we already know.

Rochman recommends books for young adults that move beyond political correctness, stereotypes, recipes, and role models. In *Teaching for a Tolerant World*, the NCTE Committee on Teaching about Genocide and Intolerance included "racism, sexism, agism, ethnocentrism, homophobia, xenophobia, genocidal politics, and militarism" (vii) as appropriate topics for young adults. Since these topics have worked their way into American culture, the attitudes connected with each find their way into the minds, if not the hearts, of American young people. Maxine Greene writes that teaching for social justice is teaching to communicate a sense of agency, that people working together might "invent a project of remediation, palliation, repair" (Ayers, et al., xxx). If we as teachers believe that prej-

udice is a learned behavior, then it is imperative that we work as teachers to reduce, if not eliminate, prejudices we find both in ourselves and in our students. The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights focuses on teaching and education as a means of reducing prejudice:

... the General Assembly proclaim this Universal Declaration of Human Rights . . . to the end that every individual and every organ of society . . . shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms . . . (Gioseffi 639)

I have structured my Young Adult Literature course to foreground social justice and critique. Students read novels that cause them to question the ways that systems (e.g., race, privilege, gender dominance, social class advantage) are implicated in specific actions, events, or situations. (See the annotated bibliography at the end of this article for recommended books that foreground social issues in young adult literature. The books on this list have been selected largely from *Against Borders* and *Teaching for a Tolerant World*, as well as from ALA's Best Books lists. They include books with a range of

interests and reading levels appropriate for middle school and high school readers.)

I invited the students in my Young Adult Literature class to focus their inquiry on a particular form of oppression that captured their interest and fit their comfort zone. (See Table 1.) Then I paired the college students with students in a high school senior general English class taught by Carolyn Suttles. Students selected books from the list, corresponded via the Internet, and prepared a Microsoft PowerPoint presentation of their reactions and interpretations of the social issues in the book. At the end of the six week project we celebrated with a pizza party in the campus student center.

### Overview of the Cyber Journal Project

One of the challenges in setting up this project was establishing cyberspace so that students could correspond with each other. Since only the teachers at the high school had e-mail accounts, we found an Internet site, [www.nicenet.com](http://www.nicenet.com), where we could register the students as a class. They could then communicate with their cyber buddy and with their teachers in this type of closed e-mail. We asked the

TABLE 1.  
OPPRESSION IN SOCIETY AND YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

Conditions	Agents	Targets	YA Literature
Race and Ethnicity	Whites	People of Color	<i>Spite Fences; A Lesson Before Dying; The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963; Slave Dancer; Seedfolks; White Lilacs; Nightjohn; River Cross My Heart; Lakota Woman; Felita; Somewhere in the Darkness</i>
Gender	Men	Women	<i>Nell's Quilt; The Girl in the Box; Z for Zachariah; When She Hollers; All We Know of Heaven; Ella Enchanted</i>
Sexual Orientation	Heterosexuals	Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals	<i>Nite Kites; Deliver Us From Evie; The Year They Burned the Books; I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This</i>
Religion	Christians	Jews, Muslims, other minorities	<i>I Have Lived a Thousand Years; The Triumphant Spirit; Stones in Water; The Night Journey; If You Come Softly</i>
Disability	Able persons	Disabled persons	<i>Peeling the Onion; Life in the Fat Lane; Crazy Horse Electric Game; Tangerine; Izzy, Willy-Nilly</i>
Class	Owning and middle class	Poor and working classes	<i>Maniac Magee; Holes; Out of the Dust; Jip: His Story</i>
Age	Middle/Adult	Young and elderly	<i>Wringer; Slave Dancer; The Pigman</i>

students to both save their correspondence on floppy disk and print a hard copy for their portfolio. Since both Carolyn and I had access to digital cameras, we took pictures of the students and sent them to each other through our e-mail accounts. This seemed to personalize the project and reduce some of the fear of writing to such an unknown audience. As students completed various assignments on Microsoft PowerPoint slides, we also sent those to each other via e-mail so students could critique and comment on each other's projects. Since the college students had e-mail accounts, Carolyn sent her students' completed PowerPoint presentations directly to the appropriate student. We could then share the presentation with the rest of the class in the computer lab. At the pizza party, students met each other in "real time," shared their experiences, created a collaborative project, and reflected on its value.

### **Thematic Approach to Focus Cyber Journal Discussion**

Social identity development theory provides us with a model to examine the characters in young adult literature. We can look at ways that oppression affects the identity development of adolescents as they are socialized into the dominant or subordinate social groups. We can discuss the novels to determine how adolescent protagonists react to oppression. Do they accept or resist their social identities? Are they able to redefine their social roles and internalize the new identity, or are they forced into accepting their original identity? Do these books "silently prompt us to conform to certain social modes of behavior and to accept certain cultural and political values" of the dominant culture? (McGillis 113). (See Table 2 for questions and sample responses to examine the social identity development of the protagonists. These questions are grounded in Hardiman and Jackson's Stages of Social Identity Development.)

### **Excerpts from Cyber Journals**

After selecting a book and journaling back and forth, chapter by chapter, with a classmate, students were asked to highlight passages that showed their "best" discussion of social issues. Once these salient sections were identified, students were to include them as excerpts in their PowerPoint slide show. For example, Lynn and her high school cyber buddy,

Mindy, discuss Maggie's friendly but dangerous relationship to Zeke, her contacts with vengeful Virgil Boggs, and the hateful deeds of her cruel mother. These students have not only identified the critical issues in Krisher's *Spite Fences*, they have begun to see the ways that Maggie actively resists her role as a proper, white female in befriending Zeke. (See Table 3 for sample e-mail excerpts from the students' journals.)

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### **How Do Students React and Portray Issues of Oppression?**

Using responses to the questions to determine social identity development (Table 3) to guide our examination of student slide shows, we can determine the student's level of discussion of the main character and the social issues presented in the young adult novel. Did the heroine accept or resist her initial social role? Did she redefine her social role and internalize the new identity, or was she forced back into her original situation? How perceptive were the student readers to the social roles of the main characters and how did they portray their understandings?

Using students Lynn Bruner and Violet Taylor as examples, I focus on the issues they addressed in their PowerPoint presentations. Unfortunately, these slides lose the animation and musical background when viewed on paper, but still the essentials are portrayed. Imagine Billy Joel's "Honesty" playing in the background of Lynn's PowerPoint slide show.

### **Illustrated Quote from the Text and Explanation**

As one of the options for creating a slide, students selected a quote from the novel that was especially meaningful in regard to the social justice issue being

TABLE 2.

## QUESTIONS TO DETERMINE SOCIAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT OF YA PROTAGONISTS

	<i>Spite Fences</i> by Trudy Krisher	<i>Out of the Dust</i> by Karen Hesse	<i>The Year They Burned the Books</i> by Nancy Garden
<b>What is the book title and author?</b>			
<b>Who is the main character?</b>	Maggie Pugh	Billie Jo	Jamie Crawford
<b>What is the oppression?</b>	Poverty, Child Abuse, Sexual Harassment, Racism	Depression, Oklahoma Dust Bowl, Disfigurement	Sexual Orientation, Censorship, Free Speech
<b>What is the naive stage?</b>	Maggie is unaware of racial differences. She asks her mother, "Why is there a drinking fountain marked colored?"	Happy childhood before the Dust Bowl; dreams of playing the piano professionally.	Although Jamie's best friend Terry is gay, she enjoys a straight, prestigious life as senior editor of the school newspaper, <i>Telegraph</i> .
<b>Is there evidence of acceptance of the dominant values?</b>	Maggie lives at home and accepts her position as dutiful, although abused daughter; she buys odds and ends from a black trader, Zeke.	Billie Jo reveals the grim domestic realities of living with the dust-destroying crops, vehicles, food, and piano.	The publication of her editorial in favor of the school's new policy to distribute condoms and frank discussion of homosexuality happens to coincide with the election of a new, highly conservative school board member, Lisa Buel.
<b>What events trigger resistance to the identity embedded in the dominant culture?</b>	Her friend, Pert, helps her see the abuse she suffers from her mother and neighbor, Virgil. From a tree, Maggie observes her black friend, Zeke, being severely beaten for entering a white restroom.	Leaves home and jumps a train for Texas; she is partly responsible for her mother's cruel death and the permanent scarring of her hands and arms; watches her father decaying with grief and skin cancer.	Jamie suddenly finds her editorial voice silenced; the school's health books removed from the shelves for review; her beloved teacher forced to resign as the newspaper's faculty advisor; her growing awareness that she is a lesbian.
<b>Is there evidence of a redefinition of the identity toward just and inclusive possibilities for social life?</b>	Maggie goes to work for a man who turns out to be a black lawyer. She continues her friendship with black activists Zeke and George.	Billie Jo forgives her father for causing the accident that killed her mother; her mother for leaving when she needed her most; herself for being the cause of her own sorrow.	Jamie comes to terms with her lesbian relationship; endures the hate-mail; witnesses the book burning; survives the near-riot at school; accepts the shutdown of the school newspaper.
<b>Is there evidence of internalization of the new identity that is committed to working democratically with others?</b>	Maggie leaves home; she agrees to be the photographer for her black friend, George, at his wedding.	Billie Jo accepts her disability and resumes playing the piano no matter how painful.	Jamie comes out of the closet and accepts the consequences of her love for Tessa.

addressed, then they found graphics to illustrate the quote. They were also asked to provide an explanation of their choice of quote and the representation. Lynn chose a quote from an incident in *Spite Fences*, where Maggie was perched up in a tree overlooking a scene in which the sheriff and other prominent whites gave Zeke a terrible beating. This was a tough scene for Maggie, one that she was not ready to view, one that cost her loss of innocence. Lynn illustrated the scene with a black and white animation of a hanged man swinging from a tree limb. Who would

Maggie hang? the sheriff? Boyce Johnson? Elmer Byer? Russell Simmons? Virgil Boggs? Her mother? Maggie had not yet redefined her identity to be independent of the oppressive system in which she lived. (See Figure 1 for Lynn's illustrated quote.)

### Original Metaphor and Explanation

Another choice for representing the main character is the Original Metaphor and Explanation. Students were invited to think of a metaphor, create a visual

TABLE 3.  
E-MAIL EXCERPTS FROM STUDENTS' CYBER JOURNALS

Mindy	Lynn
<p>"One thing I never understood was why Maggie was friends with a black boy such as Zeke when she knew it was against everybody in town. Whites stayed with whites and blacks stayed with blacks. Anyway, maybe you can help me on that."</p>	<p>"You asked a rather difficult question, but here it goes. I think Maggie was okay with being friends with Zeke because she just thought of him as the town peddler. He had something she wanted. Remember how desperately she wanted that shaving mug for her father? The mug was more important to her than whether or not it was wrong to associate with a black man."</p>
<p>"When the mother found out about the black employer, she got mad and told Maggie she was never to see him again . . . then when the beauty pageant for Maggie's little sister came up the mother practically begged Maggie to go back to work for him. If I was Maggie, I would feel like I was being used by my own mother. I think that was very wrong of her to do. What do you think of the whole situation?"</p>	<p>"The most difficult character in the book for me to understand was Maggie's mother. Mothers aren't supposed to act the way she did. I could understand Virgil Boggs. Even though there was no justification for his behavior, I just considered him to be a cruel, hateful, and vengeful person. But Maggie's mother—oh my, what a hypocrite and a witch she was. I was outraged when she asked Maggie to go back to work for one more day."</p>
<p>"The things I thought made the book good was that it shows antiracism and racism at the same time instead of just being a whole book against blacks or whites."</p>	<p>"When I read the book . . . I was totally amazed that there existed such animosity toward Catholics. I have been aware of religious intolerance against Jews, but the attitude toward Catholics in the book surprised me."</p>
<p>"I really like this book. I would recommend the book to others not guaranteeing they are going to like it, but I think it would be a good book for them to read."</p>	<p>"This is one of the best books I've ever read. Regardless of the issue, whether it had to do with racial prejudice, religious intolerance, or the injustice of abuse, Maggie had to face the issues. Her friend, Zeke, taught her the greatest lesson, "<i>Never be afraid of the truth.</i>" Maggie faced the truth and in the end, when confronted by an IRON fence, she made a long running jump, and with all her strength, leapt across that fence."</p>

representation for it, and then write a brief explanation of the image. Lynn chose to portray the injustice of Maggie's whippings as not only the cross she bore, but as a part of her redemption. Maggie was victimized by her cruel mother, but this personal injustice may have made her even more sensitive and empathetic to larger issues of social justice such as racism. In the end, Maggie does leave home, internalizes her social role as photographer of racial injustice, and joins George Hardy and his crusade for justice. (See Figure 2 for Original Metaphor.)

### Freewriting

Lynn chose to make as one of her slides an excerpt of her freewriting about Maggie Pugh. In fact, she addressed the freewriting to Maggie as a letter. Lynn acknowledges Maggie's courage in tense situations of injustice and admits that "I find it easier to face the ones [injustices] that have to do with others more easily than injustices that have been done to myself."

Lynn distinguishes between personal injustices that Maggie confronted from Virgil and from her mother and social injustices related to racial issues connected with the persecution of Zeke and George. She says, "There is a price to pay for taking a stand against the injustices in this life, whether they be personal or social, yet Zeke and George were willing to go the distance to have the truth exposed if justice would be served." Lynn's insight into truth and justice shows her understanding of the cost of social identity development in the main characters.

### Making a Difference Project/Slide

While Lynn chose a quote from *Spite Fences* for her project, Violet chose to make a difference in poetry. She had a total of twelve slides that expressed her concerns by using graphic images, quotes from famous people such as W.E.B. DuBois, and references to truth found in African American literature, art, and original verse. Her poems, such as the fol-

FIGURE 1.  
ILLUSTRATED QUOTE

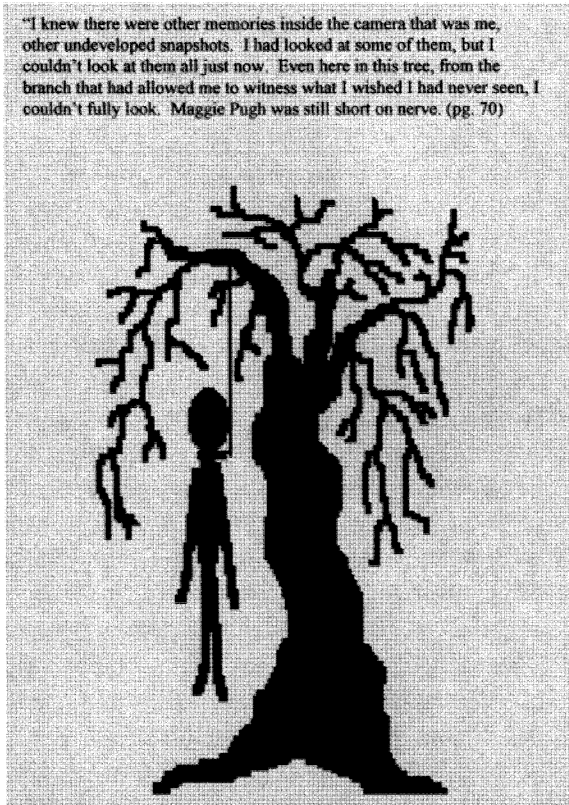
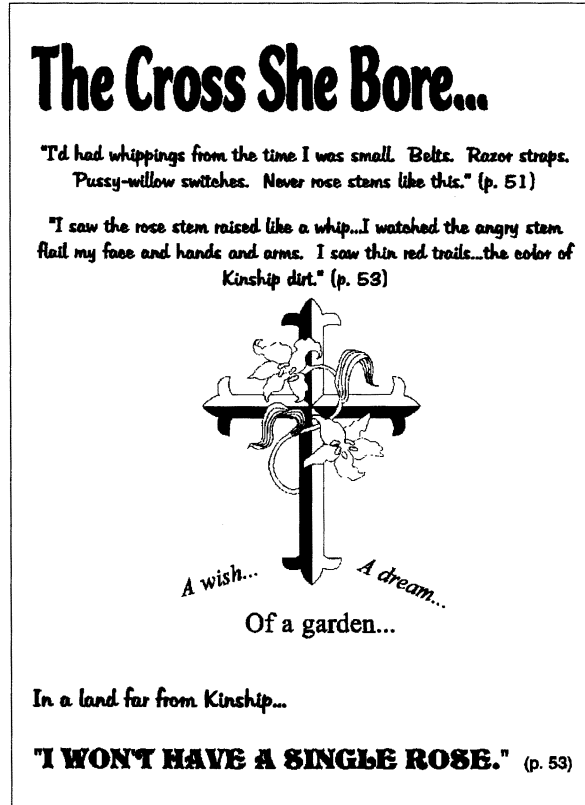


FIGURE 2.  
ORIGINAL METAPHOR



lowing, portray her personal responses to the injustices found in Meyers's *White Lilacs*.

### We Are All Flowers

We are all flowers under the same big blue sky . . .  
Some of us are tulips, some of us are daisies, some  
of us are roses.

Are the roses better than the irises? Are the  
carnations feeling left out?

We are all flowers under the same big blue sky.  
We all have a unique texture, quality, and  
fragrance.

The tulips do not smell sweeter than the daisies,  
the carnations are not prettier than the roses.

We are all beautiful flowers under the same big  
blue sky.

Growing from the same seeds into a tapestry that  
fills the ground,

We are all flowers.

Violet's project clearly portrays her world view concerning the racial issue that she studied. She has responded with a message of hope and respect for a more inclusive world.

Human beings are never "in" a stage; stage is a metaphor for growth or change. *Lens, world, view, perspective, consciousness level* are equally appropriate metaphors. What "develops" is a person's increasingly informed, differentiated, and inclusive understanding of "within groups" and "between groups" commonalities and differences and a personalized awareness of how these understandings bear on everyday behavior. Beverly Tatum uses the metaphor of a spiral staircase: "As a person ascends a spiral staircase, she may stop and look down at a spot below. When she reaches the next level, she may look down and see the same spot, but the vantage point has changed" (12).

The vantage point has changed for Mindy, Lynn, Violet, and others in the class as a result of this project. As Lynn said in her self-reflection paper, "This novel [*Spite Fences*] struck at the very core of my being and prompted me to take a closer look at serious problems. Krisher exposed us to issues of abuse, racial and religious hatred, intolerance, and violence. It caused me to think about what I have

done or could possibly do now to make a difference and show compassion for people in similar situations." The project was motivating, unsettling, and challenging. Both students and teachers have developed a greater sense of our own agency, as well as a sense of greater social responsibility toward and with others and society as a whole. We have overcome technical difficulties, learned new technology, and made new colleagues. The project has provided students with information and experiences to incorporate into their own developmental journey.

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## APPENDIX: YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE REFLECTING ISSUES OF EQUITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

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## Call for 2002 Hoey Award Nominations

The NCTE Edwin A. Hoey Award is given to an outstanding teacher, grades 5–8, in honor of Edwin A. Hoey, who brought limitless imagination and creativity to the pages of *Read* during his nearly forty-year career as writer, editor, and managing editor of the renowned educational magazine. The Edwin A. Hoey Award recognizes exceptional English language arts teachers who instill their own love of learning in their students. The winner of the award will receive \$2,500, plus up to \$1,000 for expenses to attend the NCTE Annual Convention in November; a one-year complimentary NCTE membership; a one-year subscription to *Voices from the Middle*; and the opportunity to present at the NCTE Annual Convention. You may obtain an application form by calling NCTE Headquarters at 1-800-369-6283, ext. 3612. Applications must be postmarked **no later than February 8, 2002**. Results will be announced in Spring 2002, and the award will be presented at the 2002 Annual Convention in Atlanta, Georgia.

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