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## Biracial Identity in Texts Read by Secondary Education Students

Jared Madden

Western Michigan University, [jaredsethmadden@gmail.com](mailto:jaredsethmadden@gmail.com)

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Biracial Identity in Texts Read by Secondary Education Students

Jared Madden

Western Michigan University

Lee Honors College Thesis

### **Abstract**

This thesis sought to examine how biracial identity is portrayed in the literature read by students in secondary education. Unfortunately, the findings indicated that biracialism is not being adequately portrayed in this literature. Students rarely encounter biracial characters, when they do these characters are usually peripheral, and sometimes the biracialism of these characters is presented as an obstacle to be overcome. Furthermore, teachers (at least in this researcher's local area) seem to be extremely apathetic towards even discussing this issue. The impact which all of this can have on secondary students with a biracial background is discussed. However, there are also indications that change is possible, and it is likely that there may very well be more frequent and well-rounded portrayals of biracial individuals present in the secondary school literature of the near future. This thesis examines background information regarding the American biracial experience, practices which inform school curriculum decisions, the current state of most secondary schools' curricula with regards to their presentation of biracial individuals in literature classes, and predictions about the future of depictions of biracial identity in secondary school literature. A few pertinent suggestions are offered to teachers who wish to partake in the movement to better represent biracial individuals in classroom literature.

Many children in American society today possess a biracial ethnic background. This being the case, it is highly relevant to ask whether biracial characters appear frequently enough in the books which these children are given to read in school, as well as how these characters are portrayed when they do appear. Since I am pursuing a career in secondary education, this thesis will be focused more on the secondary than the primary level. An examination of how black-white biracial identity is depicted in secondary literature may seem like a fairly straightforward undertaking, but in order to fully understand the situation, one must first understand the conditions that produced it. There are many aspects of American society and schooling practices that factor into the selection of books for secondary English classes. There have also been many historical, political, and social factors which play a part in determining what kind of books dealing with biracial identity are even produced in the first place. Factors that will be examined in this thesis (as a brief presentation of the background information necessary for properly understanding the main conclusions about biracial identity in secondary education literature) include the following: conceptions of what it means to be black or white in America (as well as how biracial individuals fit into these conceptions), how biracial children develop a sense of their own racial identities, how American society views biracial individuals, how schools go about selecting which books to study in secondary English classes (particularly with regards to multicultural literature), and how adolescents connect to the literature they read. After all of these factors have been briefly discussed (this discussion being intended to convey in the most accurate way possible what the experience of a biracial student currently is with regards to reading literature in school which features characters who are also biracial), it will then be much more reasonable to examine how biracial identity is currently portrayed in secondary literature, how it should be portrayed, and how it is likely to be portrayed in the future.

Due to both moral and scientific advancements in society many people now at least claim to have gained the understanding that race is a socially constructed and scientifically meaningless concept, but this was obviously not always the case in America. Most people are well aware of the racial history of the United States, which included the social separation of the white and black “races,” as well as the systemized degradation of the latter. However, it is both interesting and essential to our discussion of biracial identity to examine how mixed race individuals have historically fit into this phenomenon. There has always been interracial reproduction in America. Because of the “one-drop rule,” a policy that was reflective of the mentality of many people living during a time with such a hostile racial climate, anyone with any known African-American ancestry (or “black blood”) was considered by the law and society to be black (Sapong, 2009). Neither physical characteristics nor self-identification were factored into these designations. A person could look completely white, but because of the one-drop rule that person would be categorized as black if it could be shown that there was even one black ancestor in the family tree (Sapong, 2009). This practice, which became most prevalent in the post-Civil War South, reinforced the idea of whiteness as a superior state that could only be tainted by racial mixing and immediately placed mixed race individuals in a lower position in the social hierarchy than white individuals. In fact, it placed them in the same place as completely black individuals in the minds of most people. Thus, biracial people would have often had a social circle consisting mostly of black and other biracial individuals, with very few white people in it, unless they were able and willing to “pass” as white in order to gain a better position in society. Today we now recognize the experience of being a biracial person as something that is different from the experience of being totally black, totally white, or a member of any other race, but at the same time the long history of one-drop racial categorization still continues in many

ways. For example, light-skinned mixed race individuals are still featured in articles in “black magazines,” and people often say that these individuals are black.

Knowing some of the history behind the biracial experience in America, it now makes sense to make an inquiry into how biracial individuals develop a sense of their racial identity in today’s society. Like President Barack Obama, who generated much discussion when he identified himself as being black on his 2009 census, many biracial or multiracial Americans with black ancestry simply identify as black, perhaps in part because they think that is how society sees them, which is a result of past use of the one-drop rule (Sapong, 2009). In fact, many biracial individuals feel a social pressure to choose to identify with either the black or white racial group (Tatum, 1997). However, there are also many biracial individuals who do not see themselves as fitting neatly into the category of “black.” In fact, many biracial individuals experience feelings of rejection from both whites and blacks from time to time, and it has become much more common today than it was in the past to categorize oneself as biracial, which absorbs both racial identities but is at the same time its own identity (Ingram, 2000). Still, this development of a sense of racial identity can be a complex and often painful process. Poston (1990) proposed a five stage model to map out the development of racial identity in biracial individuals. The stages are as follows: “personal identity,” “choice of group categorization,” “enmeshment/denial,” “appreciation,” and “integration” (Poston, 1990). By the time a child has gone through these stages he or she will have accepted and identified himself or herself as a biracial individual. There is no hard and fast timeline for when these stages will occur, but the identity development process will at least be well underway by the time a child is attending secondary school.

Attitudes towards biracial individuals and mixed race marriages vary greatly in today's American society. On the one hand, there are indications that progress has been made. As articulated earlier, the President is a mixed race individual, although he self-identifies as African-American and is phenotypically more black than white. Many students who were interviewed about the topic voiced the opinion that "emphasis on Obama's blackness rather than multiracialism is the unfortunate result of both personal choices and political pressures" (Jeffries, 2012, p. 183). On the other hand, there are still strong indicators that prejudice against biracial individuals continues to exist, and in some instances it even appears to be stronger than prejudice against people who are or appear to be completely black. For example, there was quite a controversy surrounding a recent Cheerios commercial. Cheerios aired a commercial featuring a family consisting of a black father, a white mother, and their biracial little girl. The commercial received such a nasty racist backlash from a substantial number of people that the company asked YouTube to disable the comments on their site's video of it (Italie, 2013). This is one example demonstrating how, despite the fact that this is a time of "political correctness" and people not wanting to appear bigoted, individuals often use the anonymity provided by the Internet as a way to voice their real (and often prejudiced) opinions about various topics without receiving a negative response from friends, relatives, coworkers, and others whom they do not want to offend. Not everyone hides these opinions, however. There are still people who openly voice racist attitudes about interracial marriages, although now they often take the form of false concern for the well-being of the children produced by such a marriage, who will supposedly live difficult, rejection-filled lives. Such an attitude was voiced in 2009 by a Louisiana justice of the peace who refused to marry an interracial couple and cited social discrimination against their future children as the reason (Jeffries, 2012). This type of thinking, which is unfortunately still

fairly prevalent, assumes that prejudice and even discrimination against biracial individuals are inevitable, rather than the results of flaws in society that can and should be corrected. Most relevant to our discussion is an examination of attitudes towards biracial and other multiracial students at school. One study from 1998 found that teachers tended to perceive students of more than one race “as belonging to a minority group and often chose to identify them with the race that was considered the ‘underdog’” (Williams, 2009, p. 796). Many teachers admitted to perceiving children’s races in the way they felt society would perceive their races (Williams, 2009). A separate study from 2002 found that the majority of the school counselors interviewed did not believe that biracial children were usually accepted by society (Williams, 2009). Biracial children are often taunted at school for their physical characteristics by either black or white children, depending on which physical traits that child happens to have (Baxley, 2008). In this type of racial climate, which unfortunately still exists in many places, it is imperative that we concern ourselves with the experiences that biracial children have in school, where they are not being supported nearly enough now.

Considering that America’s schools consist of students coming from a wide variety of ethnic, economic, and cultural backgrounds, with some of these backgrounds consisting of individuals who are frequently misunderstood and discriminated against, it is quite pertinent to wonder how schools go about selecting books to study in English classes. Which books and other forms of literature are considered to be beneficial and relevant for all students to read? Many teachers stick to “the classics” almost exclusively because these works have proven themselves to have staying power over long periods of time (Stallworth, Gibbons, & Fauber, 2006). Teachers also stick to classics because they are less likely to offend parents than some other works, particularly in conservative school districts (Stallworth et al., 2006). These popular

classic literary works include the writings of authors such as Shakespeare, Dickens, and Twain. They are written almost exclusively by white British or American authors, most of whom are also male. While many of the works considered to be classics are indeed great pieces of literature that should be taught, there are dangers associated with not incorporating pieces of literature that are more modern or written from minority perspectives into the curriculum. Many of the classical works should remain in the curriculum and be taught alongside these newer works. The danger of not incorporating more modern literature is that some contemporary issues are not addressed by classic texts. Likewise, the danger of not incorporating multicultural literature is that without it many of the things taught are from the often narrow and outdated perspectives of the dominant social groups of the past, which not only alienates students from minority cultures, but also deprives students from majority cultures of the chance to view the world from other perspectives. Multicultural literature of all kinds has the potential to teach the universality of the human experience (Stallworth et al., 2006). Some have found that white students who study multicultural literature are likely to look at the world through different perspectives, think critically about their beliefs, and possibly even change some of these beliefs (Thein, Beach, & Parks, 2007). This is where politics enters the equation, as some people do not want a change in their children's beliefs to be a possibility. Given that some people are still strongly opposed to interracial relationships, these people might not want their children to read texts that affirm biracial individuals. In small communities parents might be particularly likely to directly or indirectly pressure schools to teach certain books and not to teach others. Landt (2006) identifies three main purposes for using multicultural literature in the classroom: fostering a broader worldview, interrupting prejudices and the misunderstandings that lead to them, and encouraging reflection of the self. Thankfully, there has been an increase in the use of multicultural literature

in schools over the last few decades, and some multicultural literature has made its way onto the list of classics (Stallworth et al., 2006). The main problem that remains regarding multiculturalism and curriculum selection is that it is not possible to select works that will thoroughly represent every group of people in the limited time students are in school. Therefore, students from groups that are either infrequently or improperly represented may begin to feel alienated. Since biracial literature is a subgenre of multicultural literature, it is critical to examine the prevalence of biracial literature in schools in order to ascertain whether or not biracial students are currently being given the opportunity to read literature about their own ethnicity and whether or not non-biracial students are being given the opportunity to gain a greater understanding of what it means to be biracial in the American society of today.

One more background factor to consider is how students connect emotionally and intellectually to the literature which they read in school. Park, Holloway, Arendtsz, Bempechat, & Li (2012) found that student emotional engagement varies by context and by whether or not basic psychological needs are being met. This is important because higher levels of emotional engagement and satisfaction will lead to greater academic performance. Students are highly engaged with texts to which they can relate through “experiences particular to their families and personal lives, geographic regions, gender, and cultural experiences as members of particular ethnic groups” (Athanases, 1998, p. 283). Texts prominently featuring biracial characters certainly fall under this category when read by biracial students. Although making personal connections to texts is usually beneficial, it is not helpful for students to rely on the strategy to the extent of ignoring other methods of reading (Lewis, 1999). Even when texts are taught to students who can very much relate to them, it should always be remembered that a fictional text is a constructed piece of art that can and should be analyzed on other merits than its relevance to

any one group. Thus, when analyzing multicultural (or any) literature, the focus should not necessarily be on how much students can identify with characters or situations. Nevertheless, it is good for students to encounter texts to which they can closely relate from time to time. As one researcher says, “When students do not see themselves in stories they read, there is an unconscious thought that questions their membership in the group” (De Leon, 2002, p. 51). Just as students from majority races and cultures do not need to identify strongly with every piece of literature they read, neither do students from minority races and cultures, but problems start to occur when students either never identify with anything they read or when they identify negatively with what they read every time there is a character who is highly similar to them in some way, such as when that character is of the same ethnic composition.

Now we are left wondering how and how often biracial identity is currently being portrayed in the literature read in secondary English classes. For obvious reasons, it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to gain a completely satisfactory answer to the question, as there are tens of thousands of middle and high schools across the United States, each with a slightly different curriculum. Analyzing them all would be an impossible undertaking for this researcher. However, I was hoping it might be possible to gain a general and fairly accurate idea of what is happening in the average secondary school. I sought to gain this understanding through interviews with local teachers and through surveying the research that has been conducted by other authors. Researching the works of other authors went fairly well, but unfortunately the attempt to interview local teachers did not. Out of the dozens of local teachers to whom I e-mailed questions and asked for an opportunity to conduct an interview either by e-mail or by phone, only three responded. Perhaps the rest of the teachers did not feel comfortable speaking about race, or perhaps they were so indifferent to the topic that they did not feel

inclined to respond. However, the few responses I did receive proved to be very insightful, and they correlate well with the other research. I am grateful to all three of these teachers for their participation and for the insights into the minds of today's educators which they provided, and I am satisfied with the research that I was able to do on my own. Once the knowledge that was successfully acquired has been presented, it will then be possible to make recommendations for schools regarding the selection of literature to teach in secondary English classes.

First, it is important to discuss how often secondary students are even exposed to literature featuring biracial characters. Baxley (2008) says that biracial students should be exposed to the stories of famous biracial individuals, both historical and modern, such as Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. DuBois, and Derek Jeter. She encourages teachers and librarians to seek out materials featuring these real individuals, as well as literature with fictional biracial characters, since school libraries and classrooms may not necessarily already have enough materials featuring biracial individuals (Baxley, 2008). Dutro, Kazemi, & Balf (2005) assert that paying attention to the experiences of biracial individuals broadens the discussion of race so that it is larger than the stereotypical discussions that divide race into black and white and separate the two. When white, black, and biracial students see positive and well-rounded depictions of biracial individuals that acknowledge and legitimize their biraciality, they will begin to think of their biracial classmates, or themselves if they are biracial, as people belonging to a legitimate racial category that is nothing to be ashamed of. How biraciality is presented to them can make a big difference in these perceptions. Sometimes even authors with good intentions portray biraciality as a problem or social issue, so not all of the books dealing with biraciality are always beneficial for youth to read, even if they are not intended to be harmful. Reynolds (2009) observes that “[t]he biggest problem with adding mixed heritage to these kinds of series [those

focusing on social issues] is context: invariably the series focus is on serious behavioral and societal ills” and that biracial teens, like all teens who do not fit within an all-white, straight, financially stable, or other such homogenous category “may see their own identity category prominently displayed next to the books on date rape, child molestation, and teen pregnancy” (p. 205). This is certainly not conducive to the development of a positive self-identity for students who claim membership in one of these minority groups. Even though many of us would like to think that we live in a time in which no biracial individuals are ashamed of or confused about their racial heritage, it is obvious and unfortunate that things are not quite that way. People are often most comfortable when they can hastily categorize the things and people they observe, and when others do not fit into the simplistic categories that are often presented in their minds as the only legitimate options, it can cause not only discomfort, but sometimes even rejection and hostility. If biracial individuals and interracial relationships are frequently and positively (but not unrealistically) portrayed in the texts given to secondary students, the amount of acceptance and understanding of real-life individuals who are reminiscent of the characters in the books will theoretically increase. Also, biracial individuals may experience increased feelings of self-esteem when they encounter these characters.

This leads to a question: “How often are students exposed to stories about biracial individuals?” The answer seems to be: “Not often enough.” I asked many English teachers (from secondary schools in the Kalamazoo, Michigan, area) questions via e-mail about how they have seen biracial identity portrayed in literature taught in schools. One of the questions I sent in my e-mail is “Have you taught your students from books with major characters who are biracial? If you answered yes, what is the title of the book(s)?” The few teachers who responded did not seem to have been able to teach much literature with major representations of biracial characters.

Nancy Looper of Parchment High School said that she has never taught a book with a major character who is biracial, but that she teaches *To Kill a Mockingbird*, in which one of the white supporting characters is said to have taken up with a black woman who had his biracial children. Darrell Johnson, a teacher at Comstock High School, voiced an opinion similar to that of Mrs. Looper. “I have taught for eighteen years, and I’m a little bummed to say that I don’t recall teaching any books with major characters who are biracial,” he observed.

Even on the seemingly rare occasions when students are given the stories of biracial individuals and interracial relationships to read in school, it is important to consider the nature of these portrayals. Sullivan (2002) asserts that “[i]nterracial relationships, whether they are about friendship or romance, always seem to be a source of great conflict, if not outright tragedy” (p. 40). Biraciality is also portrayed as a serious difficulty or disadvantage to the biracial individual in many cases (Reynolds, 2009). Perhaps the majority of authors have found it easier and less controversial to avoid discussing biraciality altogether, and schools have found it easier not to introduce students to the works of authors who do address the concept in their works. It is worth noting that even when students are presented with stories about biracial individuals, it is not always clear that these individuals are biracial. In fact, sometimes it even seems as if they are intentionally portrayed as being completely black. Literature about Frederick Douglass is a perfect example of this phenomenon. As Stephens (1997) says, “Frederick Douglass is widely viewed as a ‘black culture hero,’ an icon of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Afro-American history. But Douglass represents biraciality as much as ‘black-ness’- at least, he is a voice for both ‘racial’ and transracial communities” (p. 1770). Douglass makes it very clear in his writings that he is a mixed race individual, and that in fact his own father was his owner when he was a slave. This is an extremely interesting fact that says a lot about the history of race relations in the United

States. However, I remember being in school and reading about Frederick Douglass several times as a child, and not once did the literature I read mention his biraciality. I do not believe I read much about Douglass when I was in high school, but even if I had my perception of him would have been that he was a black man, and I probably would barely have even noticed or cared if someone had told me that he was actually a mixed race individual. In my mind, he would have been in the same category as all the other black abolitionists and civil rights figures I had read about, and I would not have thought that being biracial would have made his life experiences much different than if he had been a completely black man. In some ways that may be true because of the one-drop rule, but on the other hand I now know what a difference being biracial can make for many individuals, and I definitely know that historically racial mixing was extremely controversial, if not as uncommon as some may think it to have been, so I would have missed out on a large component of Douglass' story by thinking of him as a black man rather than as a biracial man, simply because of the way he had been presented to me when I read about him at school as a child. Why is there such a tendency to overlook the biraciality of historical figures?

One reason for this subtle hiding of the biraciality of certain historical figures may be the desire to simplify things for students. This can also apply in the case of fictional characters. Simplified or abridged versions of various pieces of classic literature, both historical and fictional, are often given to children and sometimes even to secondary students (normally those who are struggling with reading-related issues). These stories are shortened or edited for a variety of reasons. Sometimes the original content is not deemed appropriate for young readers, and sometimes it is deemed too difficult for young or struggling readers. On the surface, such simplification of the great stories, which enables them to be enjoyed by a larger audience, may

seem desirable because it allows for students to become acquainted with certain classic stories in a manner that is comprehensible to them and exposes them to only age-appropriate content. However, despite the potential benefits of editing the classics for students to read, the negative aspect of doing so is that various themes or plot elements may be completely removed, which can significantly alter the author's intended meaning for the story. The main cause for concern with regards to the elimination of biracial characters is that, in the worst case scenario, editors may be thinking that the existence of biracial individuals is something children should not be exposed to, as if it were something obscene or otherwise inappropriate. Even if the omission is done for less problematic reasons, neglecting to mention the biraciality of a historical figure such as Frederick Douglass or a fictional character such as Cora from *The Last of the Mohicans* deprives readers of an important aspect of who that person or character is. It also perpetuates the lack of exposure to biracial role models and characters that is currently experienced by students across the nation. Many students do not understand how many influential biracial individuals there have been in society, much less that racial mixing is something that has been occurring in America since the days of the earliest settlers. Despite that historical reality, the tastes of the general public were not conducive to positive literary depictions of biraciality until relatively recently in the nation's history. Therefore, the fact that James Fenimore Cooper chose to include Cora in his novel and to make her a strong and sympathetic character, even if he does kill her off (and thereby avoid any hint of miscegenation), is something historically significant that should be emphasized. Students' ignorance of this aspect of the work means they are missing out on an important piece of American culture and history, just as students who are not told about Frederick Douglass' biraciality and the fact that his own father was his slave master are missing out on understanding the depths of slavery's depravity, as well as the historical complexity of

American race relations and the fluidity of race, something that is not properly illustrated when people are simplistically and haphazardly lumped into the categories of *black* or *white*.

Another reason for the de-emphasis of the biraciality of various individuals may actually be the lingering influence of an African-American-led school of the thought known as the Black Arts Movement. Coming to prominence during the social upheaval of the 1960's and being to the arts what the Black Power Movement was to politics, the Black Arts Movement sought to unite and revolutionize black Americans. Part of this desire for black unification involved creating simplistic schemas that would bring as many people under the banner of "black" as possible and encourage them to strive towards common goals. The Black Arts Movement thrived on an "us against the world" mentality that its supporters thought was necessary in order to properly motivate American blacks to push for the necessary social changes that had not yet occurred in the country. Larry Neal, a prominent Black Arts author and supporter, wrote that "[t]he two movements [Black Power and Black Arts] postulate that there are in fact and in spirit two Americas - one black, one white" (Neal, 1968, p. 29). This kind of simplification, while certainly conducive to the movement's aim of catalyzing black Americans into action, is problematic because it leaves out as many people as it empowers. It not only neglects to consider other ethnicities besides white and black, but it even excludes biracial individuals who are a combination of the two. As we have seen earlier, when there is no separate category for biracial individuals, most will automatically choose to identify as black, which is probably what the Black Arts and Black Power proponents were hoping for. Granted, at the time there was little vocabulary to see things otherwise. The Black Arts Movement could have used the term *mulatto* to refer to and address people who are today called biracial, but mulatto was often considered a subcategory of black anyway. Regardless, there was not much of an attempt to acknowledge the

separate issues faced by biracial individuals. Despite the fact that the pendulum has swung back away from this type of racial model towards a broader and more inclusive one, the lingering influence of this movement cannot be overemphasized. The type of black solidarity encouraged by the Black Arts Movement has positive dimensions, but it is not always good for biracial individuals when it makes them feel out of place. Even today many texts, both fictional and non-fictional, which are produced by African-Americans continue to lump black and biracial people all into the same category and just call them black. Going back to the example of President Obama, many publications geared towards Black Americans referred to him as the “first Black President” even before he categorized himself that way on the Census. Ironically, the Black Arts Movement embraced the spirit of the one-drop rule with regards to racial categorization, just as racist white ideologies did; however, it did so with the intention of encouraging all people who were thought of and who thought of themselves as black to fight against inequality. The Black Arts Movement is a perfect example of a movement taking an oppressive fixture of majority culture and turning it around to empower a minority culture, but as an unfortunate result it left many individuals behind in the process. Real life is far too complicated for a completely successful application of such a theoretical and reductionist philosophy.

Many biracial individuals have noticed not only the lack of major biracial characters in the literature they read growing up, but also how this affected them as readers and writers. One such person is Jean-Paul Bass, a writer who expressed her feelings on the *Teen Writers Bloc* website. Bass (2012) states that “I had a pretty eclectic taste in books, but one thing never varied: pretty much all of the books and authors I liked focused solely on white characters.” She goes on to assert that “[e]ven though I wasn’t bothered by the lack of diversity as a child, it subconsciously left an impression on me and made me prewired to assume my own characters

are white, which is troubling since I'm not even fully-white myself" (Bass, 2012). Bass' posting suggests that, even though it may take a conscious effort on the part of writers, it is important to emphasize all ethnic demographics of people, since reading about only white characters can have unintended psychological effects on people that they are not even consciously aware of (Bass, 2012). Also, it is always nice and self-affirming for people to read about characters who are like them (Bass, 2012).

My research has firmly convinced me that the average person rarely encounters biracial characters in the literature they read, and particularly in the literature they read in school. In addition to the question about the frequency of biracial characters in school literature, I asked the local teachers the following question: "When biracial characters appear in books you read, is the fact that they are biracial highlighted?" Obviously, this question was hard for those who responded to answer because they had not often read books with biracial characters. They had not been given books with biracial characters when they were in school, and they had not had the opportunity to teach such literature in their own classrooms. Mr. Johnson said that in the books he has read on his own there are sometimes biracial characters, but that their racial background is "noted but not highlighted." This fits with Bass' (2012) assertion that "[i]f there was a non-white character, s/he was usually around to teach the white kids a lesson on race or tolerance or just a peripheral character who happened to be ethnic, but usually not the main character."

I also asked the teachers "Do you think there should be more books with prominent biracial characters?" and if they would be willing to explain why or why not. Mrs. Looper said that she thinks there should be more books with biracial characters so that biracial students can feel more represented. Mr. Johnson agrees, and he articulated his belief that we can expect to see more and more books like that, given the fact that the biracial population continues to grow.

There are already books about biracial characters being published, even though they are not frequently taught in schools, but as the demand for such books continues to increase there will be more and more of them published, and eventually schools will start to teach the most well-regarded of these books because of their relevance. However, there is no need for schools to wait for this to happen to teach these types of books, since many of those already published are relevant for many students and of a high enough degree of quality that they could very well be taught in schools.

Although two of the three teachers seemed to vehemently support an increase in the number of major biracial characters in the literature they teach in their classrooms, this opinion was not universal. A teacher from Loy Norrix High School in Kalamazoo, who wished to remain anonymous, had some reservations about schools intentionally choosing literature with biracial characters. When asked if he has taught many pieces of literature with major biracial characters he said he had not and that he did not necessarily desire to do so. “I can’t say that that’s been a main focus for me,” he said. He went on to state that he believes literature should be studied only for its artistic merits and that he does not like the movement to seek out certain ideologies or themes when choosing texts instead of simply seeking out the best texts. He said that texts should have biracial characters “only if it’s pertinent to the story” and that he does not “like literature with a social agenda.” Clearly he does not agree with the opinion held by myself and many others that all literature has a social agenda and that the hierarchies of great works have been constructed in such a way that excludes many minority groups. He talked about not wanting to try to manipulate young minds to make them think that they must agree with or be supportive of anything that could be potentially socially controversial or politically charged. The fact that the very existence of biracial people could be considered socially controversial is, in my opinion,

enough proof that more books with biracial characters are greatly needed. This teacher said that it is fine to study a book with a biracial character if that character is dealing with issues related to being biracial in the context of the main story, but that he would not like a story that made being biracial the whole focus of the narrative. When asked if he thought it was important for biracial students to be exposed to biracial characters, he said he did not think so. He said that students of all ethnic backgrounds can find value in great literature even if all the main characters are white or of an unspecified race. This teacher's opinions were very interesting to me, but they stood in sharp contrast to those of the other teachers interviewed, who seemed to think that portraying more biracial characters could only be a good thing. They also stood in contrast to my own opinions, and I was not able to understand how acknowledging the existence of biracial people is pushing a social agenda onto students no matter how hard I tried to consider his perspective.

We need to ask ourselves what we should now logically conclude about how and how often biracial individuals should be portrayed in literature. Given what we have learned, we can say that biracial individuals should appear frequently in the literature studied by adolescents everywhere, but particularly in schools with a large biracial population. When these portrayals occur, biracial characters should be well-rounded and prominent, and biraciality should be portrayed as being just as positive a characteristic as any other racial identity. Chaudhri (2013) provides a list of books featuring multiracial characters which can be studied in schools, books intended to lead to detailed and meaningful discussions about racial identity. She also explains how books with multiracial characters can meet some of the Common Core State Standards for schools (Chaudhri, 2013). These books feature not only black-white biracial characters, but other multiracial characters as well. This is important not only because studying the books will show that black-white biraciality is not the only form of multiracial identity, but also because black-

white biracial students may be able to relate their own experiences to the experiences of characters in the books, even when these characters are not black-white biracial. This does a great deal to speak of the universality of the human experience, as well as the commonalities between the experiences of individuals who belong to multiethnic racial minority groups.

Teachers and administrators seeking to include stories about multiracial individuals can consult Chaudhri's (2013) article and look into adding the books she lists to their curricula. We have seen that students are not currently being exposed to stories with biracial characters often enough, so there is a discrepancy between what is being taught and what should be taught. However, this discrepancy is one that can be corrected.

It is imperative to ask whether trends in the creation of school curricula are such that we will likely see acceptable amounts of biracial characters in the secondary English classrooms of the near future. Given that the biracial population is continually growing, that students have responded well to multicultural literature, and that there has been a steady increase in the amount of multicultural literature taught in schools (despite the fact that not enough of it falls under the subcategory of "biracial literature"), it seems extremely likely that eventually we will see many pieces of literature with prominent biracial characters being taught in schools. Much more of this literature is available than many would think and has been for some time, even when the need for it was not as widely recognized. In fact, not only did Chaudhri (2013) provide her reading list this year, but Sullivan (2002), who wrote his article eleven years ago, was able to identify many books of high quality that deal with being a mixed race individual in America even back when he wrote. Reynolds (2009) claims that over one hundred books with major biracial characters have been published for the young adult demographic since 1990. Simply doing a Google search can yield many results for books with biracial characters. As the need for them becomes greater,

teachers and administrators will begin to incorporate more of these books into school curricula. My attempt to interview teachers was somewhat discouraging, as one of the respondents did not seem to value biracial literature, and the vast majority of the teachers did not seem to think it worthwhile even to respond to the questions, but at least there are at the minimum a small number of teachers who have already recognized the need for more literature about biracial characters and are eager to teach that material. Reynolds (2009) supports the notion that ever-increasing amounts of high-quality material of that nature will be available for them to choose from. “A growing number of authors who are multiracial, among them Sundee Tucker Frazier, Mitali Perkins, Carrie Rosten, Danzy Senna, and Cynthia Leitich Smith, present complex issues of blended heritage through vivid characters and compelling narratives,” she writes (Reynolds, 2009, p. xx). The challenge for teachers and school librarians is doing thorough investigations into the works of such authors and determining which pieces of literature would be beneficial and acceptable for their students to read.

Young adult novels are not the only genre from which we can gain hope that biracial identity is being thoroughly explored. If increasing numbers of biracial characters are being seen in different types of artistic works in our society, this can be taken as an indication that the trend will continue to spill over into the literature that will be taught in schools in the future, even if the works in which these characters now appear would not themselves be taught in schools. Fortunately, biracial characters are already starting to become more common in various forms of media. For example, the character of Spider-Man in the *Ultimate Comics: Spider-Man* comic books series is now biracial. Previously, the alter ego of Spider-Man in that series had been Peter Parker, the character who is still Spider-Man in the other *Spider-Man* comic book titles and who has been portrayed in the movies. However, Peter Parker died in the *Ultimate Marvel* series,

which has a separate continuity from the other *Spider-Man* titles, and Miles Morales took his place as Spider-Man. Morales is portrayed as a biracial teenager of African-American and Latino descent. By creating this character for one *Spider-Man* series while simultaneously preserving Peter Parker, the classic Spider-Man who is beloved by many comic book fans, in other *Spider-Man* titles, Marvel Comics is taking an approach to increasing the diversity of their heroes that is culturally inclusive and significant, but at the same time commercially safe and respectful of fans' love for their classic characters. Many would be angered if Peter Parker had been killed off across the board so that he could be replaced by Miles Morales, but considerably fewer people have been upset by the fact that he has merely been replaced in one series. If the comics with Miles as Spider-Man sell well and are well-received by the public, there may be a movement to create more comic book heroes who are biracial.

Even though many secondary schools would be reluctant to introduce comic books and graphic novels into the curriculum, I am personally not opposed to the idea. Graphics novels have become more popular in colleges in recent years, and they will probably start becoming more commonly seen in secondary schools as well because they are listed as reading material in the Common Core State Standards. This type of open-mindedness about literary format can contribute to an increased open-mindedness about literary content. In fact, I believe the comics in the *Ultimate Comics: Spider-Man* series would be good texts to teach secondary students in order to accomplish the dual purposes of exploring the comic book medium and studying a text with a biracial protagonist.

One of the issues that teachers could explore with their students when teaching the series is how being able to see visual representations of the plot in a narrative while reading it affects a reader's perceptions of the story. For instance, does the fact that Spider-Man is visibly biracial

and that this can be seen throughout a person's reading of the comic make his biraciality seem more important to the story than it would have seemed had the story been written in traditional book form? Another issue that can be explored when studying this text, as it could when studying all texts featuring biracial individuals, is whether or not the students have ever read something with a biracial character before and, if so, how often these portrayals occurred and of what nature they were. This will get students thinking about the concept of portraying biracial individuals in literature and whether or not this is done frequently enough. As discussed earlier, it is probably not uncommon for students to automatically assume characters are white unless the reality is stated or shown to be otherwise, despite the fact that everyone is aware of the racial diversity that exists in society. Teachers and students could discuss what the implications of the tendency to make this assumption are. The benefit of discussing these and other issues while reading the comics is that students are considering issues related to biracial identity while simultaneously exploring the full potential of the comics medium to communicate meanings and ideas, both stated and implied, through the combination of text and pictures.

The Spider-Man comic books are just one example of biracial individuals being presented to the public prominently and in a positive manner. The popular series of *Fast & Furious* films features characters who are multiracial and very much look phenotypically black-white biracial, among whom are those portrayed by Dwayne Johnson and Vin Diesel, two popular actors. Wentworth Miller, who is now a prolific actor, made his name playing a biracial man who passed for a white man in *The Human Stain*. When there is such a growing movement to present biracial characters in society at large, it is only a short matter of time before the literature studied in secondary schools will start to reflect this movement to a greater degree than it does at the present time. That being said, it will still take a firm push from educators to fulfill this prediction.

Just as teaching comic books in secondary schools is “thinking outside the box,” so is making an intentional effort to teach texts with biracial characters. However, the only way for progress of any kind to be made is for there to be daring thinkers who are willing to challenge the status quo and do something which they are not necessarily accustomed to doing. There have been big changes in education with regards to the use of technology and methods of testing, and there also need to be big changes in the form of increasing the diversity of the characters who are present in secondary literature.

One of the easiest and most sensible ways to incorporate biracial literature into the curriculum is to create thematic units which allow for pieces of biracial literature to be explored alongside more canonical texts. For example, the theme of war and its effects on people’s lives is often explored in high school literature classes. Students often read works such as *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles and *The Things They Carried* by Tim O’Brien. Teachers could very easily add pieces of literature about the effects of war on the lives of biracial people. Students could be given fictional and non-fictional texts about the experiences of mixed race soldiers or about the biracial children produced during times of war, such as the “Brown Babies” who were born during World War II when some African-American soldiers had relations with white German women. There is a 2011 film called *Brown Babies: The Mischlingskinder Story* that could be shown. Autobiographical writings from biracial soldiers can be found on many websites devoted to chronicling the personal experiences of soldiers. Exploring themes from angles such as these gives students an awareness of historical and social phenomena which they might not have even known about beforehand.

As our society has become and is becoming increasingly diverse, so should the literature read by students in their schools become more diverse. If the primary function of school is to

prepare students for life in society as adults, being exposed to diversity will help them understand and navigate through a diverse society that is, unfortunately, still dealing with and healing from the effects of racism. Furthermore, schools should encourage young people to develop a positive sense of identity, and for biracial students this means being exposed to a representative number of other biracial individuals (with the biraciality of these individuals never being presented as negative). We have seen not only that schools should be teaching more literature with biracial characters, but also that they are not doing so. However, we have nevertheless seen some encouraging signs which indicate that the literature taught in schools will continue to become more diverse, and this increased diversity will include an increased number of representations of biracial individuals. When we see schools that adequately portray the diversity of our society, as well as the struggles and triumphs of individuals from all kinds of groups, in the literature they teach, we will see literature classes in which the full potential of literature to convey the difficulty, beauty, and universality of the human experience is being realized.

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