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Tim Engles and Fern Kory

Incarceration, Identity Formation, and Race in Young Adult Literature: The Case of *Monster* versus *Hole in My Life*

The authors examine how contrastive readings of YA novels by Walter Dean Myers and Jack Gantos can help students better understand the role of race in culture and in a manner that has the potential to contribute to students' process of identity formation.

Thanks largely to mainstream media, many Americans associate criminality more with people of color than with white people. The tremendous rise in the numbers and proportions of nonwhite prisoners in the United States during the second half of the 20th century might seem to confirm this association. As Heather Ann Thompson points out, "Between 1970 and 2010 more people were incarcerated in the United States than were imprisoned in any other country. . . . African American men experienced the highest imprisonment rate of all racial groups, male or female. It was 6.5 times the rate of white males and 2.5 times that of Hispanic males. By the middle of 2006 one in fifteen black men over the age of eighteen were behind bars as were one in nine black men aged twenty to thirty-four" (703). However, as many scholars, journalists, and activists have recently demonstrated, the higher rates of arrest and conviction for nonwhites are the result of a wide array of institutionally racist policing, judicial, and carceral practices.

As Michelle Alexander explains in her outstanding recent work, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, such racial disparities also severely impact black youth: "African American youth account for 16 percent of all youth, 28 percent of all juvenile arrests, 35 percent of the youth waived to adult criminal court, and 58 percent of youth admitted to state adult prison. . . . A report in 2000 observed that among youth who have never been sent to a juvenile prison before, African Americans were more than six times as likely as whites to be sentenced to prison for

identical crimes" (115–16; italics in original). If young adults do not become aware of these egregious manifestations of contemporary US racism, they remain susceptible to common misconceptions regarding race and criminality, particularly as they pertain to the population most intensively targeted in these terms, young black men.

English teachers can heighten awareness of the factors that influence racial disparities in arrest and incarceration rates by working with literature that dramatizes the differences between white and nonwhite experiences within the US criminal justice system. We demonstrate here some methods for doing so by juxtaposing two award-winning works of young adult literature with mug shots on their covers—*Monster*, a novel by Walter Dean Myers, and *Hole in My Life*, a memoir by Jack Gantos. We also suggest ways of introducing students to theoretical concepts that clarify the role of racial classifications on identity formation, and on the negotiations of differently raced youth with the US criminal justice system. *Monster* and *Hole in My Life* are both designed to function as "scared-straight" warning tales, and readers will not be tempted to imitate the terrifying journeys taken by Steve and Jack. When read together, though, Myers and Gantos send different messages about the ways that experience with the justice system can affect the identities of differently raced suspects.

In *Monster*, an innovative work of contemporary realism, Myers depicts the plight of Steve Harmon, a 16-year-old African American on trial for his relatively small role in a crime that resulted in charges of felony murder for Steve and for James

King, the 23-year-old who planned the robbery that led to the death of a Harlem storekeeper. Steve responds to his experiences in court and at the Manhattan Detention Center in two distinct forms of writing that provide a strong sense of immediacy: a handwritten journal and a more self-consciously crafted movie script detailing his trial. *Hole in My Life* is a more conventional narrative that spans the 15 months Gantos spent incarcerated in a Kentucky prison, as well as the path leading to the author's 1971 arrest and conviction for drug trafficking at the age of 20. Like the central characters examined by Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, her foundational study of the way white authors deploy an "Africanist presence," the white protagonist of this memoir notes his own racial status only when people of color enter his story, and Gantos makes no sustained effort to illuminate the role that his own race played in his arrest, conviction, and eventual release (6). Nevertheless, his race matters, as students who read *Monster* alongside *Hole in My Life* will be in a position to see, since the prejudicial attitudes of jurors and others, who literally have the power of life or death over the narrator of *Monster*, are a central concern of that work. As we will demonstrate, exploiting the intertextual connections between these incarceration narratives encourages students to take a good hard look at the role played by race in the American criminal justice system, and perhaps arrive at a clearer sense of their own place in a society that continues to function in terms of racial hierarchies.

Framing Narratives

Hole in My Life is immediately framed in terms of identity by the epigraph from Oscar Wilde that Gantos inserts between his mug shot and the title page: "I have learned this: / it is not what one does that is wrong, / but what one becomes / as a consequence of it." Soon after a description of the "tunnel of fear" (4) that was prison, Gantos begins to shape his memories into a triumphant nonfiction *künstlerroman*, telling readers that "being locked up in prison is where I fully realized I had to change my life for the better, and in one significant way I did. It is where I went from thinking about becoming a writer, to writing" (7). In the final pages of his memoir, Gantos talks about some drugs he stashed

before being taken into custody: "What remains of the rotted hash is hidden in the hole I dug for it. And I'm out in the open doing what I have always wanted to do. Write" (200). At this point, the adult author merges with the younger man whose experiences he has described, and readers are invited to feel uplifted by the idea that Gantos managed to use his conviction and incarceration to achieve a positive identity. The consequence of this positive outcome is that, for him, "the mistakes I made, the pain I endured, the time I wasted were now the smallest part of me" (198–99).

The tortured journal entry that serves as the epilogue in *Monster* provides a stark contrast to the affirmative ending of *Hole in My Life*. As at many other points in the novel, Steve's relatively heightened racial self-awareness makes it easier to see the invisible white privilege that allows young Gantos to say over and over again, "I knew I was free to change myself" (15), and for his older authorial self to document a long-term "struggle" in ways that highlight his general feelings of hope and autonomy: "I made up rules for myself and broke them and made others until I got it right" (186). Throughout his memoir, Gantos provides support for the insight highlighted by the narrator of Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*: "'Who has the most hope?' I asked. . . . 'White people,' my parents said at the same time" (45).

In contrast to Gantos, Steve Harmon is still in the midst of a full-blown identity crisis five months



after having won an acquittal, trying to capture "one true image" (281) of himself on film: "In the movies I talk and tell the camera who I am, what I think I am about. . . . Sometimes I set the camera up in front of a mirror and film myself as a reflection. I wear different clothes and sometimes try to change my voice" (279–80). What Steve especially wants to know is what his white attorney saw in him that caused her to turn away from him when he was found "not guilty." The last paragraph of the novel is a single question: "What did she see?" (281). Steve has come to understand that she and other authority figures involved in his trial may see in him what many Americans see when considering a young black male suspected of a crime—a "monster." Steve Harmon is aware of the ways his racial status has framed him, and his forward progress is stalled as he looks for a way to escape that framework.

Framing Issues: Relational Identity Formation and the Criminal Justice System

Identity is a key theme in young adult literature, which often depicts self-conscious protagonists coming to a new conception of who and what they are. However, this transformation of identity never occurs in isolation, and teachers can encourage both social awareness and individual growth on the part of their students by focusing on how social context affects the process of identity formation. To prepare students to discuss characters in young adult literature in terms of racial identity, teachers can scaffold an understanding of "relational identity formation," a concept we borrow from feminist and social identity theories. (See, for example, Chodorow; Gilligan; Somers.) Relational identity formation theory acknowledges that the development of our personal identities is heavily influenced both by our perceptions of others and by their apparent perceptions of us. Because white people and people of color are perceived as belonging to different and, more importantly, *hierarchically* different racial categories, identity formation is conversely affected by the privilege and disprivilege associated with those perceptions. At the simplest level, white people have in large part formed racial identities by perceiving certain qualities in nonwhite others, and then conceptualizing themselves as the opposite.

The reverse happens as well, but a crucial difference is that because of the perceived normality of whiteness and the more explicit naming of nonwhiteness, white people in the United States tend to be less conscious than people of color of their racial status. With some preparation, students can use the concept of relational identity formation to see some of the factors affecting the self-perceptions and actions of literary characters, and to achieve a better understanding of the serious effects of racial status for characters in the kinds of charged situations depicted in *Monster* and *Hole in My Life*, and in other narratives in which characters consider or commit a crime, interact with law enforcement or the courts, or endure incarceration.

Teachers can introduce the concept of relational identity formation during discussion of passages in *Monster* in which Steve records his thoughts about who he is and what led him to take part in a crime. (Some examples of such instances occur in *Monster* on pages 93, 116, 130, and 279–81.) It helps to write the word *identity* on the board, and then work with students toward a basic understanding of the concept ("who and what we are—or think we are"). Adding the word *formation* after *identity* encourages students to conceptualize identity as the result of an ongoing *process* rather than as a static essence. If students can grasp the idea that people gradually form their identities, instead of simply being born with them, they can then be asked to consider and describe some of the wide array of factors and forces that influence our evolving



sense of who and what we are. When students begin to include types and groups of people in their lists of factors, the teacher can add the third component to the front end of the phrase: *relational identity formation*.

To cement their grasp of this concept, students can brainstorm (individually and then in groups) examples of people who gain a significant part of their sense of who and what *they* are by conceiving of *others*, and by thinking of themselves in relation to those others. This activity will prompt students to expand their lists to include broader group identifications, which can then produce sets of binaries—boys vs. girls, students vs. teachers, workers vs. bosses, slaves vs. masters, and so on. Through this process, students can be brought to see that being a member of one group often has a lot to do with *not* being a member of a group that is hyperbolically labeled its *opposite* (as in “the opposite sex”). From the perspective of relational identity theory, people can be seen to form and re-form their identities by perceiving themselves as belonging to one group *as opposed to* another, a process that happens in terms not only of race but also of gender, class, sexuality, religion, and so on.

At this point, students can return to the text at hand better prepared to consider how a character's response to a particular situation might be informed by group affiliations that provide them with a role they are expected to play, a social script or narrative that guides or constrains their actions. As explained by Margaret R. Somers, an early proponent of relational identity theory, we “come to *be* who we are (however ephemeral, multiple, and changing) by being located or locating ourselves (usually unconsciously) in social narratives *rarely of our own making*” (606; italics in original). One race-based social narrative imposed on people like the protagonist of *Monster* is on display in the comment made by Steve's defense attorney, Kathy O'Brien, to explain why “[h]alf of those jurors, no matter what they said when we questioned them when we picked the jury, believed you were guilty the moment they laid eyes on you”: “You're young, you're Black, and you're on trial. What else do they need to know?” (78–79).

With this concept in mind, students can consider how much of the action taken by Myers's protagonist—including his scripting of a film with

the title *Monster*—is motivated by Steve's desperate need to remove the label of “monster” pinned on him by the prosecuting attorney (5) and find a way to regain his place in the oppositional categories of “man” and “human.” As students read *Hole in My Life*, they can consider moments in which the central character thinks of or encounters people of color, and whether those perceptions of others influence him to implicitly conceive of himself in opposing terms—as “white” or, more subtly, as “not like them.” (Some passages worth exploring from this perspective appear on pages 4–5, 34–35, 58–59, 61–63, 152, 159–61.)

Racial Consciousness: When “American” = “White”

One way that juxtaposing texts by white and non-white authors can help students understand how race works in terms of relational identity formation is by making whiteness more explicit as a raced identity. An effective method for helping students to conceptualize the way white is a cultural “norm” in the United States is to discuss with them another concept from Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*: “American means white, and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen after hyphen” (47). At this point in her study, Morrison clarifies a significant result of the obstinate centrality of whiteness in the American imagination: because white Americans continually represent “ordinary” or generic Americans, their whiteness is unmarked, and thus in a sense invisible, at least to white observers. When Gantos does not specify the race of “two big guys” who “wanted to check my trunk to see if I had any more ‘loot,’” or the “special alumni” who come to his school to talk to students “regarding the perils of criminal behavior,” readers are expected to assume that these characters are white (26, 27). And because Gantos is white, his lawyer is perhaps justified in assuming that the court will see his client as “just a kid” (131).

On the other hand, Steve Harmon—who feels as if he has “the word *Monster* tattooed on his forehead” (61)—is increasingly aware that his racial status makes it difficult for others to see him as an individual human being. As he notes in his journal while describing his fellow detention cen-

ter inmates, "I want to feel like I'm a good person because I think I am. But being in here with these guys makes it hard to think about yourself as different. We look about the same, and even though I'm younger than they are, it's hard not to notice that we are all pretty young. I see what Miss O'Brien meant when she said part of her job was to make me look human in the eyes of the jury" (62–63). While Jack's whiteness is only apparent to him when he is confronted by people of color, and never an issue for any (presumably white) authority figures, it is, as we will see, an issue for many of the characters of color that he meets. On the other hand, Steve and other characters in *Monster* are continually conscious of his blackness. While Jack can think of himself as just a regular "kid," Steve has to come to grips with the burden still borne by African Americans in terms of identity, the vexing "double-consciousness" described more than 100 years ago by W. E. B. Du Bois as a sense of "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (3).

To cement this concept of differing forms of racial identity, and to highlight as well the relative lack thereof among white characters and authors, teachers can provide printed copies of Morrison's quotation, then write the following equation on the board for discussion: "American" = "white" (the quotation marks both emphasize and contest the two terms at play). You can then conduct a "thought experiment," asking students to clear their minds, close their eyes, and describe the image that comes to mind when you say "all-American girl." This phrase works well because of its common currency and because students almost invariably report that it provokes images of girls who are (or in the terminology of many white students, "happen to be") white. Because "white" (like male, straight, and middle-class) is the "normal" or default racial status, an "all-American girl" raced as white generally comes to mind for both white and nonwhite students. Once students register some understanding of Morrison's profound point about the beneficial and often protective normality of whiteness, they

are better equipped to consider the significance of racial status and its effect on the actions and prospects of both white and nonwhite characters. (For a discussion of similar methods while teaching an adult-level novel, see Engles.)

As in real life, racialized self-consciousness and the relative lack thereof influence protagonists' perceptions not only of themselves but also of their place in the criminal justice system and their navigations through it. Comparable scenes in these two works make it easier to see the effects of this fundamental difference in awareness. In *Hole in My Life*, Jack Gantos presents his younger self as someone who rarely displays conscious awareness of his own racial status. His lack of reference to a specified racial identity suggests that he self-identifies as a "regular" American, and as "white" only in comparison to nonwhite others.


Certainly the young Gantos is bemused when a member of the Black Revolutionary Party in St. Croix calls him out as a "white boy" (62) at the start of a conversation that strikes him as something like "a stage play of rehearsed hostility" (63) and ends with him fleeing to "an all-white bar" (65). Teachers can highlight the rarity of white racial self-consciousness in young adult literature and elsewhere by asking students to consider what prompts Gantos to label *this* bar "all-white" at *this* particular moment—and why he would likely not label it racially otherwise. In this case, he does so as a response to his encounter with the explicitly raced members of the Black Revolutionary Party; that is, he identifies the racial makeup of the bar, and of himself, relationally and oppositionally.

Shifting Positions

Reading *Monster* with—and against—*Hole in My Life* encourages students to develop a more conscious awareness of the race-based privileges and disprivileges at work in their own lives, and in the various systems in which "justice" is meted out. By highlighting intertextual racial tensions, teachers can use these vicarious experiences of crime and punishment to move students beyond a siloed appreciation of what Jack has accomplished and what Steve is up against. Students who have looked at the justice system from Steve's perspective are better able to question Jack's naive faith that he

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understands "the black point of view" based on his "year of racial harmony at the King's Court [motel]" (59). In spite of his awareness that "[t]here were a lot of white haves and a lot more black have-nots" in St. Croix, Jack is disturbed that "there was no way I could get them to see my sympathies. I was just another white target on legs" (59). From his position of white privilege, "the level of [black] anger was beyond reason" (59), and Jack's understanding of how the world looks from another racialized point of view is revealed to be as superficial as his understanding of his own racial status.

The texts we choose to share with students and the work we do with them have the potential to contribute to students' process of identity formation. Side-by-side reading of works from different racial perspectives puts students in a position from which they can see normative subject positions as racial. This raised consciousness is particularly important when reading literature about incarceration—literature that can sharpen our thinking about legal justice and social justice. In this context, teachers can help students consider just how level the playing field looks when viewed from different positions, especially differently raced ones. 

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Find more lesson plan and teaching ideas about Walter Dean Myers texts, including *Monster*, by visiting the Read WriteThink.org calendar entry on Myers. <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/calendar-activities/walter-dean-myers-author-20670.html>