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You Can't Just Pick One Race and You Shouldn't Have to: Analyzing Biracial Protagonists in Young adult Fiction

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, Children's Literature has seen a notable increase of texts involving racial diversity. One area that does not garner as much attention is Young Adult fiction with biracial protagonists. With the growing number of families in the United States identifying as biracial or multi-racial, it is important to examine the representations of biracial characters offered to readers. Poston has noted that biracial adolescents often experience crisis and alienation, as they are forced to choose an identity that does not fully encompass their complex racial background (Nuttgens 2010). Sarah Jamila Stevenson's *The Latte Rebellion* (2011), Joan Steinau Lester's *Black, White, Other* (2011), and Sandra Forrester's *Dust from Old Bones* (1999) work against the idea that people should have to choose a racial identity that alienates them from a part of themselves, arguing instead that the world is not divided into stark identity categories, though recognizing racial differences remains of the utmost importance. The characters in these novels are able to navigate the channels of being biracial, while developing a sense of what Lourdes India Ivory calls "biracial competency" and "biracial efficacy," allowing them to function successfully within both racial groups (Ivory 2010). This research analyzes authorial depictions of biracial characters, and the effect these depictions have on character identity development throughout the novels.

INTRODUCTION

Reaching adolescence brings about many opportunities for self-discovery, and one of the most crucial and often-overlooked aspects of this self-discovery revolves around racial identity. The struggle for racial identity faced by young biracial women in the United States, the demographic focus of this paper, sets them apart from their uni-racial counterparts. Literature is often one of the first places that introduce adolescents to the struggles of identity formation. Biracial characters in young adult fiction can mirror the lives of those reading the texts, allowing the authors to influence their biracial readers' self-perceptions. William S. C. Poston writes that, "The notion of racial identity is considered important in terms of shaping attitudes towards oneself, towards others in one's racial group, and towards other racial groups, including majority and minority groups" (Referenced by Nuttgens 356). By analyzing the female biracial protagonists in three young adult novels—Sarah Jamila Stevenson's *The Latte Rebellion* (2011), Joan Steinau Lester's *Black, White, Other* (2011), and Sandra Forrester's *Dust from Old Bones* (1999)—patterns of representation emerge. These patterns demonstrate that the aspects influencing the way a character feels about her biraciality range from her family's attitudes toward her biracial make-up, interactions with other characters in school environments, to responses toward the character's identity from members of her community. Due to the limited amount of research conducted on such an essential topic in the field of children's literature, much of this paper will draw from the disciplines of Education and Psychology, in addition to multicultural children's literature.

I. The Issue of Race in Children's Literature

There is very limited recent research specifically dealing with biraciality in children's literature. Much of the discussion in the field surrounds multicultural literature and the inclusion of texts that are not "all white." In a groundbreaking article published in 1965 by *The Saturday Review*, Nancy Larrick brought the issue of "The All White World of Children's Books" to the

general public. This article specifically dealt with the omission of African-American characters from texts; at that time only 6.7% of the 5,206 books published for children in 1964 had at least one non-white character (Larrick 2). This statistic does not include any characters with a biracial background, as research regarding this demographic was nonexistent at the time of that study. As of February 24, 2015, researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison did a random sampling of 3,500 texts out of the estimated 5,000 children's literature books published in 2014. Their sample revealed a meager 396 texts written about non-white characters, with no specific distinction given to texts written by and about biracial individuals (Horning 2015). This number is an increase from the texts published about non-white characters in the year 2013—253 books—but it still reveals the limited progress that has been made in publishing racially diverse books for young readers.

The statistics on the number of racially diverse texts, and the exclusion of biracial representation as a category within these statistics, become even more alarming when the 2010 U.S. Census reported a record number of individuals declaring more than one racial/ethnic background, with the number of citizens reporting belonging to two or more races as over nine million (U.S. Census Bureau 2011). The number of texts dealing with biracial characters is deeply disproportionate to the number of people self-defining as biracial. It is important to note that the University of Wisconsin-Madison does not include a "biracial" identity category in their study of children's texts, alongside other established categories for minority racial identities.

When texts are created about this group of people, they often include inaccurate or problematic depictions of biracial characters. It is essential for readers to feel there is an aspect of connection with the texts they engage with; finding a relationship between oneself and a character has self-affirming attributes, which often lead to young readers seeking out texts with characters similar to themselves (Sims-Bishop 1990). Problems arise for biracial individuals seeking self-representation because of the very limited number of texts with authentic depictions of biracial characters. Motoko Rich writes in his 2012 *New York*

Times article, "For Young Latino Readers, an Image Is Missing," that without a mirror reflecting characteristics of the readers in a text, the readers have fewer opportunities to "build [reading] stamina and deepen their understanding of story elements."

Biracial children have to work harder than many other readers to find some aspect of character identification. In her article entitled "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom," Rudine Sims Bishop states that "When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part" (1990). The incorporation of diverse characters in texts, including biracial characters, helps readers from diverse backgrounds not only to appreciate the texts, but also to feel better about themselves. Equally, the notion that the only type of "biraciality" that exists in the United States is that of black and white persists in society today, and books representing all types of biraciality are needed, though it is not always necessary to have a racial "match" for the reader to identity with a biracial character. Featuring biracial characters representing any two races would be a positive development.

II. You Can't Have Just One

Although the number of books containing biracial characters is strikingly low, it is even more curious that, within published texts, the majority of these stories contain more than one biracial character. It appears that the biracial individual is unable to stand alone on her journey, and as a result always has an additional biracial sidekick, or foil. For example, in Sarah Jamila Stevenson's *The Latte Rebellion* (2011), the biracial protagonist of the story, Asha, is "foiled" by her best friend and fellow biracial female character, Carey; Carey's skepticism about joining and following through with their plan to bring racial issues into focus at their school contrasts with Asha's can-do spirit and willingness to undertake the cause. Carey and Asha also differ when it

comes to handling the adversity surrounding their protest; Carey succumbs to the communal and familial pressures that develop and loses hope in the "Latte Rebellion," whereas Asha disregards the backlash and continues to fight for what she believes is right. Additionally, Asha and Carey are joined by many other biracial, or "latte" colored compatriots, from a variety of different biracial identities, over the course of the novel. Despite the lack of representation of biraciality in the field, books that do incorporate these characters seem to include the stories of multiple biracial characters in their narratives. It is typical that protagonists have supporting characters, but quite often there are stark differences between the primary and supporting characters, often including differences in physical appearances and backgrounds, particularly when at least one of the primary characters is from a minority racial background.

Joan Steinau Lester's *Black, White, Other* (2011) also features characters with a biracial make-up, but in this case the characters are siblings. Nina Armstrong and her brother, Jimi, were forced to "choose" between their racial identities when their parents split up. The Armstrong siblings' father is black, and their mother is white. When their parents divorced, the brother and sister chose where their allegiances with their parents lay, against the backdrop of racial tensions in their native city of Oakland, California.

The racial tensions in the city and within the family force the siblings, Nina in particular, to examine the differences in the cultures that make up their backgrounds. Nina is troubled by the way white people perceive the city's racial protests: her friend Claudette's father, who is white, calls the protesters "looters," as opposed to Nina's father, who is black, and identifies them as "protesters." This forces Nina to recognize the differing responses that come from being a part of a specific racial group. Additionally, when Nina interacts with some of her black girl friends at school, she must deal with the binary system that asks her to identify either as black or white, when she wants to fit in and be proud of *both* cultures. For example, when Nina's friend Demetre says, "White girls. You can't trust 'em. . . I'm gonna keep my eye on

you! You might turn *all* white. We got to watch out" (Lester 114), Nina is immediately put on the defensive, responding, "I'm part white!... Funny how now I feel like defending the white part of me, the white part of my family" (Lester 114).

This example illustrates the potential for biracial individuals to experience distrust from full members of the minority group, as these members see the possibility for the biracial individual to abandon minority identification in favor of majority privilege. Reflecting on Demetre's comment, Nina struggles with "biracial efficacy," which Lourdes India Ivory defines as "an individual's belief or confidence in his or her ability to live effectively and satisfactorily within two cultural groups without having to compromise his or her sense of cultural identity" (141). Making an effort not to choose one cultural group over another, and instead fully embracing both racial identities, illustrates Ivory's assertion that multi-racial people need to develop "biracial competency," or the ability to respond to the different social cues, personality traits, and intricacies of living in two different cultures (141).

The practice of including additional biracial characters in novels with a biracial protagonist can be attributed to the idea that, during adolescence, young people will begin to demonstrate "the basic social need to communicate, as young people seek to belong, to form affiliations" (Hadaway 40). During adolescence, many individuals want to feel that someone understands who they are; thus, being able to relate to others who may share a similar background is comforting and helps them become comfortable with their emerging identity (41). These peer-to-peer interactions "reflect peer power and relationships, as language is used to position individuals negatively or positively" (43). Through conversations with other individuals of a similar background, biracial individuals learn to navigate their dual identities. The relationships that biracial individuals create with their peers help them frame themselves positively within society, through the inclusive language and social behavior these novels demonstrate.

One such situation takes place in Sandra Forrester's *Dust from Old Bones* (1999), in which multiple biracial characters are paired together and serve to represent differences in character perceptions of biraciality. A difference that occurs in this text is that

the characters in this novel are, in fact, cousins. Set in the south during the time of American slavery, Simone and Claire-Marie are both biracial teens, though different in practically all other respects, even down to the color of their skin. Simone is much darker than her cousin, who could pass for white, resulting in some revelatory social interactions between the two cousins and their families. For example, Simone's mother and father consistently encourage her to help with the household tasks to keep the family running smoothly, a family-oriented Afrocentric value, whereas Claire-Marie's mother insists on having their two black slaves do a majority of the housework, leaving little for Claire-Marie to do other than making her bed in the morning, a more individualistic, Eurocentric value. Additionally, at various points throughout the text, much more emphasis is placed on Simone's black background and how it troubles her white background, as opposed to Claire-Marie's seemingly "white-focused" identity. For example, Claire-Marie has six brand new dresses made out of the fabric from Paris that all of the girls in school fawn over. When Simone mentions her new dresses being made out of American fabrics, her classmates respond with a lackluster "How nice," before returning their attention to Claire-Marie (27). These examples show how the emphasis placed on social status, influenced by race and economic class, has a profound impact on the way the characters live.

Multiple biracial characters in a text allow the protagonist to analyze and validate her own ideas about self and social identity, particularly as it relates to racial identity. It has been said that character identities, much like reader identities, are greatly influenced by the social and cultural factors that surround them, including but not limited to family, friends, and peers (Scherff 3). Taking this into account, it makes sense that biracial characters benefit from being able to see and interact with others who are biracial. This reinforces Bishop's assertion that children benefit from seeing themselves reflected in the texts they read (356), just as the biracial characters in these texts benefit from the reflection of themselves in the other biracial characters with whom they interact. Shared experiences and identities are transmitted from character to character within these books, as well as from the books to their readers.

III. Familial Influences on Identity

The development of character identity in the novels is very much affected by familial factors. Simone Racine, in Forrester's *Dust from Old Bones* (1999), lives in a world in which her identity is greatly influenced by her older cousin, Claire-Marie. Growing up in Louisiana in 1838, Simone's dark skin and long, curly black hair are constantly compared to her cousin's "skin [that] is creamy white and her hair [that] falls as straight and shiny as raw silk down her back" (4). Whispers from the community lead Simone to take a more critical look at the way her cousin lives her life; she has heard throughout her life that Claire-Marie could "pass" for white, even though she is biracial, like Simone. The two cousins have very contrasting ideas of what it means to be a person of color. Simone often has to weigh her cousin's opinions against her own, as well as those of her other family members. In the following passage, Simone describes her friend, Lucien, and the ways that two of her family members perceive him:

> Claire-Marie does not approve of Lucien, because his skin is dark and he wears no shoes, and because he has little schooling and works as a stable boy. She says he smells of horse droppings and swamp water. Maman agrees. But Papa—who is dark himself, and worked at many lowly jobs while learning his trade—calls Lucien "remarkable." How many boys of thirteen work six days a week, Papa says, and hunt on the seventh to support their families? I have told Claire-Marie that Lucien will not always be a stable boy, that he plans to have a stable of his own one day, but Claire-Marie says he will still smell of horse droppings (13).

Simone reconsiders her opinion of Lucien after hearing the ways in which her family members perceive the boy. Furthermore, Claire-Marie's opinion of Lucien has the potential to lead Simone to question her own racial identity, as she does not want to be identified by the same stereotypes her cousin applies to

her friend. Dealing with such stereotypes is a constant struggle for biracial characters who "on a daily basis…must navigate a world where other people are making assumptions about who they are and what they can achieve based on their skin color" (Hughes-Hassell 218). If Claire-Marie believes those things about Lucien because of his skin color, it becomes unsettling to Simone to think about what her cousin may think about *her*, and her dark skin, as well. Lucien's lower social class status also influences Claire-Marie's perceptions, as the harsh social structures of slavery automatically placed black people into a lower social class than those with lighter skin. Even though Lucien is not a slave, his darker skin and working class status contribute to Claire-Marie's disapproval. At the same time, Simone's dark-skinned father, who understands the challenges Lucien faces, gives her a positive perspective on her own identity. When it comes to developing her views about herself, these two perspectives have a great impact on Simone's eventual decision to embrace both parts of her biracial background.

Parents can be a driving force behind issues of identity confusion and social pressures to "pick" one race over another. This problem is illustrated by Asha's parents in Stevenson's text, *The Latte Rebellion* (2011). Not only do some of Asha's father's comments deter her from embracing the fullness of her racial identity, they also reinforce some of the commonly held stereotypes about people of Asian descent. Asha is a biracial girl with a Chinese and white background. She is stereotyped, like many Asians, as being very smart, always at the top of her class, and striving to gain acceptance to Ivy League schools. When issues arise regarding the treatment of biracial students at her school, and Asha and her friends begin their movement to embrace their biraciality, she begins to lose her focus on schoolwork and experiences her parents' disapproval. Although her parents are unaware of the full extent of her involvement with the protests, they begin to see her once exceptional grades slipping, her loss of motivation when it comes to applying for college, and tensions within her friend group as a result. Her parents think she has strayed from their dreams for her future. Asha's father makes comments such as, "I don't want you to get distracted" (108), and "[t]hat's an im-

provement; you were down at eighth [in class rank] after a disappointing fall semester" (244).

Familial pressures cause Asha to feel the need to choose between focusing on her grades and leading the protest to raise awareness about the challenges faced by biracial people. Ivory suggests that Asha's acts are a way of increasing her "biracial efficacy" by fully embracing her biracial identity, standing up for what she believes in, and making a concerted effort to learn about and live effectively within both cultures (Ivory 142). Her family's pressure to ignore her feelings affects her confidence in pushing forward with her movement. Once Asha's parents find out that her academic standing has been jeopardized by her political activities, she begins to fear that she has failed them. While it may seem that the tense interactions between Asha and her parents are not related to her biracial identity, her comment to her father suggests otherwise: "I—we—think this is an important issue, but maybe you wouldn't understand. I thought for sure you'd understand because you're half-and-half, too, but I guess you're really just..." (285). Asha's efforts to get her father to acknowledge the importance of her cause, and not to focus solely on the possible consequences, mirror similar struggles faced by the characters in Forrester and Lester's novels, whose families do not fully understand the challenges faced by their biracial daughters.

In Lester's *Black, White, Other* (2011), Nina must face the two cultures that contribute to her biraciality each time she is shuffled from one parent's house to another, and the differing aspects of her racial self are reflected in her parents' separate identities. An added dynamic of familial pressure is placed on Nina as, due to her parents' divorce, she has chosen which parent to live with, ultimately deciding to remain with her white mother. Nina also feels that *neither* parent completely understands what it is like to be biracial in a city where racism is a deeply divisive issue. After regularly confiding in her mother, Nina begins to see that there are some stark differences between the two of them, noting, "My feelings about my mom are so mixed up I'm gonna explode...It seems like she's standing across a wall from me—this wall called race—and suddenly I'm on the other side" (92).

Her younger brother, who is darker in complexion than she is, has chosen to live with their father, which leads her to feel abandoned by the black side of her family and to experience a sense of lost membership in African-American culture. Nina often negotiates her feelings by saying that her own father doesn't want her (10), that he chose her brother over her (10), and that she can't feel fully connected to either culture, because she lacks an African American cultural influence (12).

Mary Cipriani-Price, Ben K. Lim, and Donna J. Alberici examine some of the repercussions of raising a biracial child to select one racial identity over another, observing, "[t]his has the potential to alienate the children from their other heritage and possible cause ambivalence toward that race, as well as a sense of a fractured loyalty to the parent of the other ethnicity" (156). Despite Nina's conflicted feelings, it is apparent that both sides of her family are responsive to her struggle. At several points in the novel Nina's mother says that "race doesn't matter" (94). She also encourages her daughter to "claim every bit of who you are" (94), giving Nina permission to embrace *both* of her racial identities. As she grows up, Nina's father frequently asks her to come and stay with him so that she will not lose their relationship and her ties to black culture. Nina's father is also able to provide her with a supportive perspective on belonging to a minority, starting with how to negotiate the negative attention paid to blacks because of the riots in Oakland (13). Nina's mother reflects a white opinion of the tensions in the city, while making efforts to show Nina that being biracial is perfectly acceptable. Although it is difficult for Nina's parents to understand the challenges of her everyday life as a young biracial woman, their efforts to expose her to both cultures and to provide her with both viewpoints make her navigation between the two cultures, along with her relationship with each parent, less difficult.

IV. Community Pressures

The communities in which biracial characters live also have an impact on their thoughts and feelings about their biraciality. In Lester's *Black, White, Other* (2011)*,* Nina's struggle

is complicated by the racial unrest in Oakland, California, which impacts her in ways different from her other friends at school. While a majority of the students respond to the unrest by placing their allegiance with the group representing their racial background, Nina cannot decide which group to identify with. Her parents' comparatively open approach causes Nina more confusion; when describing the racial tensions at her school, she complains, "[i]t's all about race at school. You have to be one or the other. You don't understand at all" (94).

Cipariani-Price, Lim, and Alberici note that biracial children are often labeled as "different" by their peers, and have to answer questions such as "what are you?" or "are you mixed?," as opposed to operating under a sense that simply *being* is enough (157). Nina experiences a problem identified as common to many biracial individuals: discrimination from *both* ethnic groups within her community (157). Nina is alienated at school, where she is shunned because she doesn't fit into either racial category; both her white and black classmates try to force her to "pick a side:" "Nobody [at school] talks to me anymore, because of who I am, a black girl or a white girl?" (78). The racial tensions in Oakland bring the struggle shared by many biracial individuals into sharp focus, illustrating the difficulties faced by those who question their racial and cultural identification.

Although Simone, in Forrester's *Dust From Old Bones* (1999), is "free," the implications of American slavery define non-white life in 1830s Louisiana. When the surrounding community questions Simone's background, she is forced to examine what makes her unique. Talks of a slave rebellion in another state lead her to examine the lack of rights experienced by other African-American people—people whose blood also runs through her veins. Gaining the right to marry whomever she chooses, like her cousin Claire-Marie, inspires Simone to emulate her Aunt Madelon from Paris, France, a woman who takes social justice issues to heart throughout most of the novel. The community that surrounds Simone perpetuates the belief that people of color are of a lower class, a reality that becomes clear when she witnesses a slave auction (69). Believing it is the community, and not her

own willpower, that dictates her life choices, Simone makes the courageous choice to stand up for what is right, thus gaining greater contentment with her personal self-identity.

Asha also struggles with community pressures in Stevenson's *The Latte Rebellion* (2011). As she enters her senior year of high school, Asha is reminded of the ignorance of some of her classmates, who refer to her as a "towel head" (1), even though she is of partial Asian, not Arab, descent. Asha is regularly reminded of her outsider status as a biracial individual by other characters, such as her main antagonist, Roger Yee. In this case, the community's prejudice motivates Asha to make a difference for herself and others like her. By starting a movement for the recognition and appreciation of people with biracial backgrounds, Asha engages a new, biracial community, which rallies around the need for acknowledgement of their identities. Positive support and encouragement from this community to keep the movement going lead, however, to other problems for Asha. While she is able to become more comfortable with herself as a biracial individual and gains self-confidence through her involvement with this movement, her involvement also alienates her from some of her friends, disappoints her parents, and results in legal issues with her school district. During this process Asha experiences Walker S. C. Poston's "choice of group categorization" and the "alienation and crisis identity phase." The social support provided by her community also allows her to engage more fully with her biracial identity (Kleinman-Fleischer 162). These positive pressures encourage Asha to invest in her movement, which leads to creative tensions within her school community. Asha must choose between saving face, keeping her reputation and good academic standing in her school district, and deciding to stand up for what she believes in, even though it may jeopardize her chances of gaining admission to an Ivy League school. Conflicts such as this, and the similar conflicts faced by the characters in the other novels, lead readers to a fuller self-examination of the characters' backgrounds, and a realization that one's identity is larger and more complex than mere skin color.

V. Making Amends and Making Change

According to Bernice Pescosolido, Elizabeth Grauerholz, and Melissa Milkie, those in minority groups often have more complex relationships between conflict and culture, due to a lack of understanding from majority groups (446). Conflict, and the subsequent reaction to conflict that comes from being a member of a biracial community, is also a central feature in these three novels. In addressing conflict management, researchers Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann crafted five main styles of leadership (Referenced by Miller 162): (1) *competing*, (2) *collaborating*, (3) *accommodating*, (4) *avoiding*, and (5) *compromising*. The texts discussed in this paper suggest that a *collaborative* approach is often most effective in allowing individuals to manage both sides of the conflict, rationalize them, and make decisions based on satisfying each party involved. This takes into account a concern for the self, as well as a concern for others when deciding how to respond to a difficult situation. One could suggest that conflict is ever present for biracial individuals, as they live with multiple identities on a daily basis. Biracial individuals must "collaborate" with their racial identities in order to achieve both biracial competency and efficacy.

As discussed above, Asha and her friends respond to conflict by creating a rebellion of mixed race individuals in Stevenson's *The Latte Rebellion* (2011). In order to change the culture surrounding biracial people in her community, and also to raise money for a post-graduation trip, Asha and her friends begin their protest to show that biracial people are "more than the sum of [their] parts" (14). This concept takes off, and members of the Latte Rebellion begin to face more resistance than ever before, once the community learns about their cause. The girls who founded the Latte Rebellion handle these challenges in different ways. As the group strives for more equality and faces the struggle to "[redistribute] the social power" (Pescosolido, Grauerholz, Milkie 447), their friendships disintegrate as a result of their different choices.

Using the Thomas-Kilmann conflict management model (Miller 162), one of Asha's friends, Bridget, demonstrates conflict

avoidance, and low concern for others, as she backs out of the rebellion to focus on other, less controversial aspects of her life as a student. Citing the following incident as the final straw, Bridget states, "...[a] guy actually grabbed my shirt and said something stupid like 'Hey, I thought that Latte thing was full of racial radicals.' I couldn't deal with it. I got the hell out of there" (Stevenson 137). Remaining involved with the rebellion for a longer period, Carey illustrates Thomas-Kilmann's conflict management style of *accommodation* (Miller 162) by abandoning the cause only after working with Asha to start the rebellion, write the manifesto, create the website, and sell shirts. She accommodates Asha's requests both to remain close to her friend and to support the cause. Carey later informs Asha: "I put just as much effort into this as you did. . . but this isn't what I signed up for" (148). Carey backs away from the Rebellion when legal issues begin to arise, also noting at this critical moment that she is "too busy" to dedicate so much of her time to the rebellion (148).

Because Asha is on a mission of self-discovery and personal growth, she stands by the Latte Rebellion until the end. Demonstrating Thomas-Kilmann's conflict management style of *collaboration* (Miller 162), which results in a high concern for others, along with a high concern for oneself, Asha risks her entire future for what she values. Asha is suspended from school, pending a disciplinary hearing; she demonstrates the biracial child's "basic social need to communicate...to form affiliations" (Hardaway 5), by drawing on the support of her biracial peers as she goes through the hearing and waits to learn her academic fate.

Even as Asha is forced to take a step back from the center of the Latte Rebellion, her classmates, who organize a rally to share their experiences as biracial students, carry her beliefs and efforts forward. At the rally, several students talk about how being biracial has affected them, and how "reality is more than black and white" (Stevenson 259-267). Asha chooses to embrace all sides of her biraciality and uses this framework to make her community a better environment for other biracial people. She manages the conflicts that arise by never backing down, continuing to seek what she believes in, and relying on the help of others who support her cause.

In Forrester's *Dust From Old Bones* (1999), Simone demonstrates that coming to terms with one's identity as a biracial individual is not always such an easy task, especially when issues of family are part of the conflict. When Simone's uncle leaves her cousin and aunt, the whole family is forced to examine their backgrounds, their talents, and what has helped them survive. Simone is able to see the privilege that being biracial grants her over those who are full members of a minority race. As her aunt, Tante Vivienne, prepares to sell one of her two slaves, Simone goes to her father, stating that she "only wants to help Paulette and Eulalie" (113). Simone feels a connection to the enslaved women and hopes that her father, who has supported her efforts in exploring her black identity, will assist her efforts to try to save them from the auction block. Even though her father supports her, he is unable to assist the women; Simone and her Aunt Madelon, at tremendous risk, manage to move the women to safety. Simone practices a form of *collaboration* (Thomas-Kilmann 162) as she tries to enlist other members of her family in her cause, while gaining a better understanding of her position as biracial. Despite her youth, she sees the evil of slavery, an attitude reinforced by Aunt Madelon, who helps Paulette and Eulalie escape (Forrester 119). Understanding that each part of her background plays a role in who she is as a person, and respecting each part as it makes up her whole, allows Simone to strive toward the achievement of biracial efficacy both as she navigates her biraciality and resolves never to demean those who represent minorities. She understands that doing so would demean a part of herself (Ivory 141).

Conflict is also ever present in Nina Armstrong's life throughout Lester's *Black, White, Other* (2011), as she is not only dealing with the conflict within her family, but also that of her community. Nina takes an interesting approach, one that differs slightly from those of both Asha and Simone, in order to cope with the challenges surrounding her biraciality: she looks at the past to help navigate her future. Nina's father gives her the manuscript of a novel he is writing, based on the diary of her great-great-grandmother, Sarah Armstrong, so she can begin to understand that racial tensions and minority life have never been easy (31). As tensions in Oakland rise, Nina takes solace in Sarah's story, using it to escape from the

bifurcated racial world she lives in and relating her struggles to those of her ancestor. The journal helps Nina "get lost in [Sarah's] world for a while and to be inspired by her courage," because she would "need it" (136). Having the ability to "get lost" in Sarah's story allows Nina to develop a better sense of her own identity as she uses the journal to navigate her place within her own community. Being able to escape into Sarah's world for a time gives more credibility to Scheff's assertion that biracial readers benefit from seeing biracial protagonists in the texts they read (3). When Nina sees part of her culture reflected in the journal, she is able to feel a greater connection to the black part of her identity. Even though Nina briefly runs away from all of the challenges in her life, finding someone to relate to—to form an "affiliation" with, as Ivory puts it—allows her both to make her way back to society and to become fully comfortable with her entire racial identity (Ivory 141).

All three of the protagonists in these novels use conflict in order to strengthen their sense of who they are as biracial individuals. Their search for information contributes to their development of "biracial efficacy." The affiliations that are made among members of their community, members of their family, close friends, and even people from the past, echo the biracial person's need to share a likeness with others and to establish a bond with someone like them (Hardaway 5). These efforts to form affiliations directly respond to the development of each character's "biracial competency," which allows them to gain an understanding of the social cues and differing behavioral patterns that influence their background and personality development (141). These characters' personality developments help each girl as she begins to understand, become more comfortable with, and embrace who she is as a biracial individual.

CONCLUSION

Being biracial and having familial, communal, and literary influences allows each of these characters, in du Bois' words, to form a "double consciousness" in "…a world which yields [her] no true self-consciousness, but only lets [her] see [her]self through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation,

[her] double consciousness, this 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" (164). The biracial individual has to see her life through the perspectives of both of the majority and minority background. Nina, in *Black, White, Other*, must look at who she is, based both on the perspective of her mother, a white woman, and her father, who is black.

Biracial individuals may fully accept themselves as they are, but there is always a chance that society will place them in a racial group based strictly on their appearance. Being labeled as a part of the minority group, regardless of self-identification, can lead to violence, distrust from full members of majority and minority groups, loss of social privilege, and various other implications for those who identify as biracial. This categorization may result in individuals feeling that no group will accept them, thus negating their attempt to achieve biracial competency and efficacy.

The characters in these texts are forced to examine themselves not only introspectively but also through the eyes of those they come into contact with. Because their separate racial identities combine to form a single, complete self-identity, two separate cultural perspectives influence their identity formation. These characters eventually embrace their biraciality as their full racial self-identification. It is important for readers to be able to make connections with those who are similar to them in terms of racial self-identity formation, as exemplified by all of the characters discussed in this essay, and as shown in the research of Rudine Sims Bishop, who discusses the need for readers to connect with characters like themselves (1990).

This identification is also reflected in the work of Rhina Maria Fernandez Williams, as she looks at the importance of classroom instruction for the biracial child in school environments. Williams points out that, in order to be able to effectively instruct biracial children, one must first understand who the child is culturally, and what forces in their cultures make up who they are (177). In order for the biracial individual to feel comfortable accepting both sides of her background, each character must have the chance to come to terms with the ways that biraciality makes

her whole. Studies have shown that many biracial children feel that others from uni-racial groups are unaware of the different challenges that biracial individuals face (Williams 199). This is where the education of these children becomes important, and where texts like Sarah Jamila Stevenson's *The Latte Rebellion* (2011), Joan Steinau Lester's *Black, White, Other* (2011), and Sandra Forrester's *Dust from Old Bones* (1999) can become particularly influential. Allowing children to see the significance of being biracial will support their self-acceptance and full identification as members of our larger society.

As the numbers of biracial people increase, society must grow and change, moving toward acceptance of biracial individuals as they see themselves, ensuring that they feel recognized and have the opportunity to gain self confidence and acceptance of who they are. Literature can serve as a means to help guide and reflect this journey. As a society, we can assist in providing the tools for biracial individuals to feel strengthened by both sides of their background and fully embrace the identities that make them who they are. Their self-identifications should then serve as the building blocks for their social identifications as society moves forward.

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