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Teaching Resistance with Young Adult Literature: Critical Conversations about *Internment*

JENNIFER L. MARTIN AND JULIE WASMUND HOFFMAN

People are marching in the streets. Buildings are burning. Statues that represent hatred and marginalization are being torn down. In response to the murder of George Floyd and uprising of the Black Lives Matter movement, the youth of America has joined forces with folx who have been fighting for justice for decades. Some call it rioting. Some call it uprising. Some call it resistance. And Sam Cooke sings, “It’s been a long, a long time comin,’ but I know, a change gonna come, oh yes, it will.” This is the season for change and our youth will play an important role.

**Background: The Future is Dystopian—
YA Literature Can Help Us Navigate Uncertain Times**

Ahmed’s novel *Internment* presents a “nearer-than-you-think” realistic and terrifying depiction of the logical extension of fascism unchecked: the corralling and containment of humans who are perceived not to fit within the American ideal of what makes a citizen, ghettoizing those humans perceived as a threat based upon the irrational fear and hatred of the unknown “other.” The genre “future dystopian” almost fits *Internment*, except that a new term such as “Present Dystopian” would be better suited for the appalling accuracy and timeliness that Samira Ahmed brings to the novel.

Internment is a young adult novel told from the point of view of Layla Amin, a young Muslim American high school student. Her father and mother (a professor and doctor, respectively) worry about safety for their family as Islamophobia becomes more prevalent and violent. Forced curfews for Muslims, political speeches suggesting that Muslims are a threat to America, and phone applications to inform on suspicious neighbors become ubiquitous. Early in the text, Layla, her family, and all members of various Muslim

communities around the country are removed from their jobs and their homes and sent to live in an internment camp in the desert—simply because of their religion. *Internment* is an important novel because it illustrates what can happen when attitudes of exclusion, xenophobia (an irrational fear of people from other countries), and Islamophobia become the governing force, and when “good people” do nothing to stop the hatred. As Layla describes:

A gauntlet of guards lines the sidewalks to the entrance, some at the curb, others with their backs to the stone building. . . Their fingers aren’t on the triggers, but the air is so charged, it feels that way. I notice an American flag patch on each soldier’s sleeve, and below that a black rectangle with EXCLUSION AUTHORITY embroidered in white. (Ahmed, 2019, p. 47)

Internment can illustrate to students the importance and impact of resistance in addressing exclusionary social and political norms. As Layla, the protagonist, states, “Some of the parents, they’re too scared; but that’s not all the adults. I know others will resist. We have to ignore the haters and not worry about what they’ll think” (Ahmed, 2019, p. 264). This passage also illustrates how young people can make a difference in their world.

Because we advocate for students, and we do so through high-quality young adult literature, we brought the book *Internment* to the attention of our colleagues. Initially, when broaching the idea of using *Internment* in the ELA classroom at a national conference, the second author sensed resistance from other teachers. Some alluded to the challenges they may face when providing students access to texts that some may view as “too political.” Sims Bishop (1990) reminds us that books can serve as windows and/or mirrors for students. Students may not understand someone different from themselves without these windows. When they read, students can identify with the protagonist and think, “She’s just like

me, but just practices a different religion.”

Conversely, students who are marginalized need to see themselves reflected within texts—as in a mirror. The curriculum must reflect their voices, cultures, and ideas. As Layla, the protagonist, ponders:

“He’s Jewish,” I say. Saying it out loud feels like a betrayal. America might only be rounding up Muslims right now, and the Director might only be focused on us, but bigots don’t generally limit their hate—Islamophobes are likely anti-Semites too. From the scowl on his face, I’m guessing the Director is one of them. (Ahmed, 2019, pp. 191)

Books like *Internment* are important in all classrooms because they have the potential to build empathy, promote social justice, and generate prosocial behaviors and actions. If you desire these things for your students, but fear the potential risks involved in choosing a text such as *Internment*, we suggest previewing the materials, finding research to reinforce curricular decisions, aligning texts with content standards, and finding allies and co-conspirators. Co-conspirators are like allies as they are not members of the group, but are people who interrogate their own privilege and decenter their voices while “. . . build[ing] meaningful relationships with folk working in the struggle, tak[ing] risks, or be[ing] in solidarity with others” (Love, 2019, p. 117).

Muslim Exclusion Laws: Internment

Internment details the fallout of the imposition of Muslim exclusion laws mandated by an Islamophobic American president, told from the point of view of a teenage protagonist—Layla.

Her family is forcibly confined at Mobius, an internment camp for Muslim Americans. As Layla states, “Ten minutes. That’s how long we’ve been given to pack up our lives, to leave our home. To prepare for relocation. How do we even begin? That’s not even time enough to say good-bye” (Ahmed, 2019, p. 34).

Layla and her family are no longer considered to be “Americans” along with other American Muslim families imprisoned at Mobius. As they are imprisoned at Mobius, families are separated, and each person is marked with an identification number. “I look around as people take seats in our segregated sections—South Asian, African American, Arab, Southeast Asian. East Asian and Latinx, too, though they seem to be fewer in number” (Ahmed, 2019, p. 96). Mobius is in the desert, so families are isolated from their homes, jobs, and communities, which are now replaced with

surveillance cameras, electric fences, and armed guards.

Layla’s parents comply with the rules at Mobius because they are afraid. Layla, however, desires to resist. Resistance comes with a cost, however. When an internee protests, she is presented as an example by the Exclusion Guards:

Now she’s being hauled down the Midway, pulled by each arm, bleeding from her mouth and her forehead. She’s writhing and trying to kick and twist herself out of the grasp of the Director’s private security guards. They ignore her screams. Like she’s a ghost they can’t see or hear. (Ahmed, 2019, p. 172)

Despite these circumstances, Layla, with the help of other insurgents, leads a rebellion which initially brings more oppression for all of the internees, and more extreme violence toward Layla at the hands of “The Director.” While beaten and bloody, Layla grapples between conflicting thoughts. Her brain vacillates between: “You’re not alone. Be strong. Live. Fight.” and “Beg for my life. Beg. Accept tyranny. Bow to a false god” (Ahmed, 2019, pp. 329–330). She chooses to be brave even though it could cost her life.

Battleground: The Future is Dystopian—Why Internment Is Important Now

The theoretical framework that informs this analysis is culturally responsive literacy practices built upon abolitionist teaching (Gay, 2000; Love, 2019, December; Love, 2019). According to Ladson-Billings (2009), cultural responsiveness involves: academic achievement, socio-political consciousness, and cultural competence. Because cultural responsiveness seeks, through education, to identify, problematize, and ultimately transform institutions and society with the goal of ending all forms of oppression, culturally responsive teachers must not only possess the will to end oppression but the *knowledge* to inform their choices and actions. Thus, culturally responsive literacy educators take the extra time necessary to research the experiences, individuality, and learning styles of all of their students in order to better reach/teach them by meeting them where they live. In sum, cultural responsiveness is a lens allowing for the interrogation of social, educational, and political issues by prioritizing student voices (Chapman, 2007). Additionally, as Milner (2013) argues, cultural responsiveness demands that teachers incorporate their students’ ethnic and racial backgrounds into the curriculum.

Culturally responsive literacy practices seek to explain how language and literacy (re)produce subjectivities and subject positions. Students can also engage in such practices when they consider multiple meanings and constructions

of identities and text. As Freire (1970) inspires us, literacy can empower when people are encouraged to question the world around them with the goal of advancing social justice. Students can be encouraged to utilize critical consciousness in school, which may help them to navigate the heightened surveillance in their lives—disproportionately imposed upon communities of color. Freire’s concept of a “humanizing pedagogy” allows for the expression of students (1970). In essence, students become co-creators of knowledge through the problem-posing method of local struggles, and the development of critical consciousness (Freire, 1970).

We advocate for the inclusion of *Internment* into English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms for four reasons:

1. *Representation matters.* It is important for all students to read counter-narratives of individuals and groups who are commonly stereotyped (e.g., American Muslims, Black and brown students, Latinx students, students who are members of the LGBTQ+ community, etc.). It is also important for students to read stories in which they see themselves. Whether the story is a mirror or a window (Sims Bishop, 1990) for a given reader, when a representative of that community writes the story, they are sharing their own experiences.
2. *Social consciousness matters.* Ahmed’s novel presents a protagonist who uses her social consciousness to advocate and fight for the overall public good. This social consciousness can and should be discussed in the classroom. Students need the opportunities to think critically and discuss matters of social consciousness. What could be more American?
3. *Complex questions matter.* *Internment* presents many complex questions and themes that will inspire student interest, inspire difficult dialogues, and motivate students to become engaged in social action. This enables students to bring their own voices to the conversations, and, to hopefully, be heard.
4. *Inclusion matters.* Inclusion is imperative to creating a sense of home, safety, and freedom from oppression. To listen to all the voices of those who make up America IS American. Sometimes to get there we need a little help from fictional characters that can show us how. Do many books offer the same benefits? Of course.

We highlight *Internment* because it addresses various implicit tenets of critical pedagogy: representation, social consciousness, complex questions, and inclusion, and the ways in which they pertain to our present America—an America in which Islamophobic and racist actions are ever present in our current political times. We argue that such

critical pedagogy work is crucial in our politically contentious world. *Internment* presents opportunities for classroom conversations that can no longer be ignored.

Freire (1970) critiqued the banking model of education, or the method of teaching where students are empty vessels: the teacher as disseminator of knowledge, and the students as passive recipients. In this model, students are not active in their own knowledge production or creation. As individuals living in vexing times, we face social, cultural, economic, and ethical issues on a daily basis; thus, students must be able to relate to, apply, and create relevant knowledge pertaining to current issues and unfamiliar situations that they might face in their lives (Mayo, 2002, 2004; Yadav, et al., 2014). As Freire (1970) states, “Human beings are not built in silence” (p. 88). Freire tackles racism and oppression through the pedagogy of liberation. Liberation comes from dialogue, open communication based on mutual trust.

Playground: The Future is Dystopian—How to Teach *Internment*

We have all heard the idiom that we should not judge a book by its cover. Often this is true, but when we first saw *Internment*, the cover immediately caught our attention: a brown-skinned girl, wearing all black and a baseball cap with the word “resist” across the front, enmeshed in barbed wire. The title paired with the cover inspired us to think about those Americans who have the luxury to take their freedom for granted, and those of us who still feel unsafe. The juxtaposition of the word “resist” among the barbed wire represents the risks involved when a person or group resists oppressive practices and fights for something better.

Knowing that many of our students feel vulnerable and other students cannot see the hardships beyond their own, we need to provide our students with books that instill hope, promote inclusivity, and build a foundation to remind them that people of all cultures and faiths belong. *Internment* is one of these books.

When we introduced *Internment* to our students at an urban middle school, we showed them the cover and asked them to share what comes to mind. Student responses included oral and written reflections. Selected comments were representative of overall responses to the novel.

In one powerful exchange with an African American student, Michael (a pseudonym) indicated, “The first thing I think about when I see this is the girl who was run over by that car.” Michael referenced the white nationalist who deliberately drove his vehicle into a crowd of peaceful counter-protestors at the Unite the Right Rally, a white supremacist

rally, in Charlottesville, Virginia (August 11-12, 2017). His comment communicated that students are inherently socially and politically conscious beings. Michael made connections between the powerful persona portrayed on the cover with a powerful and tragic event that he had witnessed. He made these connections before he even opened the book because he knows about compromised safety, risks that come with resistance, and why they are still worthwhile.

Our students know about compromised safety. Our students who have been marginalized or experienced being “othered” by their peers are aware of the group(s) that have power and privilege and the groups that do not. The groups with power and privilege are what Audre Lorde (1984) coined the mythical norm, the “unmarked” groups within a society. In our schools and classrooms, the norm is whiteness.

We witness the dangers of whiteness, the mythical norm, in positions of power on a regular basis. At a recent national conference for educators, we attended a session on “Engaging Students with Diverse Books,” facilitated by a college librarian. The librarian held up a copy of *Internment*, and we were interested in what she had to say. We were shocked to hear, “I would never recommend that you read this novel with an entire class.” Immediately, we asked why. The speaker replied, “I am afraid that it will replicate riots. It made me really angry, and I don’t want to spread that hate.”

What the librarian did not realize, or chose not to realize, is that the hate is already here. As indicated above, students do not come to our classrooms as blank slates. They come with knowledge of their homes and cultures, as well as hope, fear, trauma, joy, and various experiences. If our students do not represent the mythical norm, or whiteness, they come to our classrooms having already experienced racism and being othered—likely, they have already had their ideas of home and safety compromised; they are already familiar with the hate. That is why it is necessary to read *Internment* with an entire class. It is crucial for us to have these complicated conversations in our classrooms about home, safety, racism, whiteness, and the mythical norm, and to think critically about all of these ideas with our students.

Classroom Connections: “It’s Not Political, It’s Our Job”

Those of us who have taught in K-12 environments understand that bullying has always been a problem. However, we need to know that the most vulnerable populations are at-risk for bullying, harassment, and hate crimes, often with severe violence, particularly in our current climate (HRC, 2017). For this reason, we recommend pairing *Internment* with the website, *#USvsHate* devised by social justice scholars

Pollock and Mai. The mission statement for the project is as follows:

#USvsHate is an educator-and youth-led messaging project designed to counter bigotry in schools and create safe and welcoming classrooms. We seek to unite school communities against the recent hate surge, by catalyzing ongoing learning and action. (para. 2)

#USvsHate provides inspiration as well as project opportunities to spread anti-hate messages within schools and beyond. Hate speech is destructive and harmful and teachers are ethically, morally, and legally obligated to protect all students from the hate speech of students, and, potentially, their parents.

According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (2018), U.S. hate crimes reported in 2017 surpassed a previous high, at 7,175 incidents, representing a 17% increase over the five-year high previously reached in 2016. It is essential that teachers step in to interrupt hate speech. If we do not, we send the message that we endorse the hate.

The fact that some of our students experience hate crimes due to their skin color, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and a variety of other factors is something all educators must face and address. This is not a matter of politics, or it is not merely politics—this about the humanity of the children in our classrooms. In order to protect humanity, we need to engage in critical conversations, not just with other educators, but with our students.

Internment: A Novel Unit

Inspired by Wiggins and McTighe (2015), we created an *Understanding by Design* unit plan, which can be tailored to a variety of grades, curricula, and student/teacher interest and need. In the case where teachers must work within a traditional curriculum, we suggest that *Internment* be paired with a canonical text, but this is not required. Teachers could easily tailor our suggestions to fit a stand-alone unit on *Internment*, pairing with our suggested recommended texts, and include informational, biographical, and poetic texts. For those who teach using the reader’s workshop model, *Internment* could be one book among several that cover themes of resistance and youth activism.

The important factor to note is that this unit is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive. We hope that interested teachers tailor our suggestions to meet the grade level needs of their students, as well as student interest and need.

Understanding by Design Inspired Unit Plan: Samira Ahmed's <i>Internment</i>	
Timeline: 3-4 Weeks	Suggested Grades: 8-12 Middle Grades (MG), High School (HS)
UBD Stage 1 - Desired Results	
Essential Questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Why are diverse points of view important to a functional democracy? How do different forms of leadership impact people and society? How does personal prejudice translate into institutional discrimination? How can individuals and societies overcome entrenched bias? How can activism create real social change? 	
Course Enduring Understanding(s) or Learning Outcomes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Being open to uncomfortable conversations, such as issues dealing with race, class, gender, sexuality, etc., are crucial for 21st century citizens. Segregation, oppression, and mistreatment of humans based solely upon their identities is unacceptable, particularly in a democratic society. Making friends and associations with people possessing different points of view and identities will enrich one's life. 	
Measurable Unit Objectives: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish connections between canonized text and Ahmed's text. Examine character actions based upon textual evidence. Make connections between social/political protests throughout U.S. history to advance the cause of democracy for more people and apply them to the texts. Analyze different forms of political leadership throughout the world and their implications for different groups of people. Describe differences among social/cultural groups in terms of power within the U.S. and compare with those in the texts. 	
Traditional Texts: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Number the Stars</i> by Lois Lowry (MG) <i>Farewell to Manzanar</i> by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston (MG) <i>1984</i> by George Orwell (HS) <i>Handmaid's Tale</i> by Margaret Atwood (HS) <i>In the Time of the Butterflies</i> by Julia Alvarez (HS) 	Recommended Contemporary Text: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Does My Head Look Big in This?</i> by R. Abdel-Fattah <i>I am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban</i> by Malala Yousafzai and Christina Lamb. <i>The Proudest Blue: A Story of Hijab and Family</i> by Ibtihaj Muhammad Newsela Text Set: "Addressing Xenophobia" (https://newsela.com/text-sets/119596)
Additional Issues for Discussion/Curricular Connections <ul style="list-style-type: none"> U.S. Japanese internment camps U.S. indigenous population relocation, reservations, boarding schools U.S. immigration policies, current and historical U.S. deportation policies, current and historical Cross-curricular or interdisciplinary unit with social studies classes 	

Reading as an Act of Hope

Young adult literature can be a source for raising issues that make us feel uncomfortable, tell the truth about ourselves, and put us into the shoes of others (Cart, 2011; Rosenblatt, 1995). *Internment* does all of these things, and, in addition,

it is a commentary about our current times. The othering of those outside the mythical norm can lead to xenophobia—the fear that leads to dehumanization, exclusion, eventual internment, and, for some, worse. This is why it is crucially important to intentionally select texts that move students from their comfort zones and into the shoes of “the Other.”

UBD Stage 2 - Learning Opportunity Evidence	
Learning Opportunity #1: Class Engagement Timeline: Throughout the unit Students are assessed on their engagement with the novel (e.g., reading quizzes, exit passes, class discussions, cooperative learning group discussions, word cloud/protest signs, op/ed practice. (Teacher Tip: Create a variety of low-stakes opportunities for students to engage with the novel and each other. Can be used as formative assessments.)	Learning Opportunity #4: PSA Timeline: Midpoint of unit In groups or individually (student choice), students develop a public service announcement on a teacher-approved issue, focusing on some form of activism. Students connect the issue that they desire to change (or to create awareness of) to an issue in one of the required novels.
Learning Opportunity #2: Challenged Book Project Timeline: Beginning of unit In groups, students select one of the required texts and research the history of its challenged status, the reasons for this, and develop arguments as to the value of their chosen text for continued classroom use. Optional Assignments: Slide presentations, oral presentations, class debates, collages.	Learning Opportunity #5: Creative Engagement Timeline: Midpoint of unit Students create a letter to the editor, or a speech to be delivered/published in a community forum, advocating for a change related to a novel-related issue.
Learning Opportunity #3: Poetry Unit Timeline: End of unit Taking inspiration from Layla's poetry, students experiment with a variety of poetic forms taking on the persona of various characters from the required texts and writing about themes examined in the novels. Students compose a minimum of 10 poems, create associated illustrations and/or graphics, and develop a graphic novel, bound poetry book (or similar).	Learning Opportunity #6: Analysis Paper Timeline: End of unit With the assistance of the instructor, students develop a thesis for this paper, guided by one of the essential questions, which will compare the canonized text with Internment.

Several classroom practitioners promote independent reading (Kittle, 2013; Miller, 2009) as critical for readers at all levels, and we agree. Some teachers advocate for the community-building that happens with a read-aloud (Layne, 2015; Trelease, 2013), and, again, we agree. We postulate that the community-building that occurs amidst sharing a high-quality young adult novel may lead to empathy, inclusivity, and social action for some of the participating readers. There are also those who champion the occasional whole class novel (Roberts, 2018), small book clubs (Serravallo, 2010), and pairing contemporary YA fiction with the classics (Herz and Gallo, 2005), to which we also nod. We contend that any of these methods of reading are appropriate, so long as all students participate in the classroom discussion about the themes (or common themes) in the texts. Ultimately, the discussion is where the opportunity for transformation occurs and these conversations are more important than ever. The future is dystopian and the time to act is now. It has indeed

been a long time comin,' but "a change gonna come, oh yes, it will."

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