

Racebending, Racial Capitalism, and Representation in the Texts We Teach

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Two recent examples from publishing industries surface the stark differences between racebending as a form of storytelling and racial capitalism¹ as a marketing ploy that upholds white supremacy. In this essay we aim to illuminate the differences between these two ideas and consider how such ideas operate within English language arts curriculum. In doing so, we hope to present why English educators should consider broader publishing decisions in their conceptualization of teaching English language arts, including teaching graphic novels and young adult and middle grades literature. While we can never divorce market forces from the production and consumption of young adult literature (Garcia, 2013), we can develop critical stances in understanding market forces to structure the way we approach text selection and pedagogy.

Racebending and Racial Capitalism

Racebending, according to Drs. Ebony Elizabeth Thomas and Amy Stornaiuolo (2016), is a “process by which people reshape narratives to represent a diversity of perspectives and experiences that are often missing or silenced in mainstream texts, media, and popular discourse” (p. 313). This process is often a just one as it seeks to identify, amplify, and center marginalized voices. In that sense, racebending can be a tool to combat white supremacy. Comic book companies racebending superheroes has become a more common occurrence over the past few years with characters like Spider-Man, Miss Marvel, and various members of the Avengers being rewritten and reimagined as characters of Color (Gill, 2016; Owens, 2017;

¹ We use the concept “racial capitalism” as theorized in legal studies from Nancy Leong, not to be conflated with Cedric Robinson’s concept of the same name theorized in the groundbreaking book, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*.

Torres, 2019). Sadly, but not surprisingly, racebent superheroes like Miles Morales have been met with racist vitriol from some portions of comic fandom (Fu, 2015). Such responses underline a belief that racebending challenges, in part, white supremacy's power to define who *gets* to be a hero and who *gets* to be seen as a savior of society. Again, racebending superheroes can act as a tool to combat white supremacy in popular culture.

Legal scholar Nancy Leong (2013), drawing on Cheryl Harris' (1993) concept of "whiteness as property," defines racial capitalism as the "process of deriving social and economic value from the racial identity of another person" (p. 2152). Given the history and contemporary social, economic, and political realities of the United States, racial capitalism almost always "involves white people benefiting from nonwhite racial identity" because "white people in the US are more likely to have the power and resources to use another person's identity to benefit themselves" (Illing, 2019, para. 7). Leong uses examples of college brochures and popular advertisements to illustrate her point: representation in such material belies the reality that white people maintain political and economic power. In other words, representation is important but it does not guarantee equity or justice. As Leong argues in an interview, "racial capitalism is all show and no substance" (Illing, 2019, para. 9). To compare with racebending, racial capitalism can be employed to benefit white supremacist economic structures by using the faces and labor of people of Color to continue providing profit for institutions without any structural change.

Racebending and racial capitalism can be valuable analytic tools for considering our work with young people. As Torres (2019) reminds, pop culture can be leveraged to teach about "power structures, class, and privilege" because the messages of pop culture are "often reinforced through politics and schools" (p. 162). Specifically, we believe racebending and racial capitalism are concepts to consider when thinking through teaching literature. Movements to challenge which books we select to give curricular space such as #DisruptTexts (Ebarvia et al., 2018) and #WeNeedDiverseBooks (We Need Diverse Books, n. d.) are inspiring and influential to use as educators concerned with creating socially just English classrooms. We also want teachers to consider how market forces and capitalism operate in producing books and marketing strategies that can uphold white supremacist ideologies even if the packaging of such

ideologies is slightly altered. We illustrate two examples in the following section.

Book Covers vs. Superhero Narratives

Recent book releases and attempts at advertising books highlight the difference between racebending and racial capitalism, and the implications on classroom curriculum. Barnes and Noble working with Penguin Random House attempted to release canonical books like *Moby Dick*, *Emma*, and *The Three Musketeers* with revised covers that featured characters of color (Williams, 2020). On the surface, this move could be seen as racebending. However, it is actually a form of racial capitalism. The company sought to gain material benefit by reducing racial diversity to a brand. To use Nancy Leong's words, Barnes and Noble were treating racial identities like "commodities, which gives the impression that they are just like anything else you could buy or sell" (Illing, 2019, para. 13). Barnes and Noble eventually dropped the marketing ploy after online criticism. Yet, the fact that it was seen as a good idea in some marketing meetings speaks to the pervasiveness of racial capitalism in our culture.

Literature scholar and pop culture critic Dr. Lauren Michele Jackson (2020) noted that the decision to create alternate book covers and the ensuing criticism, mostly in online spaces, "exposed the tendency to use representation to utterly meaningless ends" (para. 4). Noting the whiteness, malesness, and straightness of the canon, Jackson sees the move by Barnes and Noble with Penguin Random House as an attempt at "solving literature's existential crises by literally throwing brown faces at the problem" (para. 7). Her analysis of the alternative cover art leaves questions about what literature educators can do about the canon. We believe calls to teach the canon in critical ways that surface oppressive systems (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014) should be heeded by English teachers. Simply replacing the cover of white narratives with faces of color does not change the stories or said narratives nor does it do anything to push against the white supremacist ideological forces that undergird the construction of the canon. We also believe that racebent superheroes can provide a way for English teachers to reimagine the canon and recenter what gets curricular focus in English classrooms (Worlds & Miller, 2019). Fortunately, we are not alone.

Compare Barnes and Noble's attempt at book cover remaking to the

racebending of superheroes like Miles Morales and Kamala Khan. *Miss Marvel, Vol I: No Normal*, in which the titular character is imagined as a young Pakistani American girl, uses the superhero genre to challenge notions of “normalcy” that are underlined by power dynamics (Gill, 2016). Jason Reynolds’ young adult adaptation of Miles Morales positions the school-to-prison pipeline as a central antagonist of the eponymous superhero, thus opening up conversations about racist school policies and structures (Worlds & Miller, 2019). Similarly, the racebending remake of the *All-New, All-Different Avengers, Vol. I* has been praised for addressing racism within the superhero genre rather than adopting a post-race framework (Torres, 2019). The narratives in each of these racebending superhero stories grapple with questions of racism, power, and oppression in ways the Barnes and Noble short-lived alternative cover art did not.

We are not suggesting Marvel’s decision of racebending superheroes should be accepted without critical interrogation. Indeed, artistic decisions cannot be severed from market impulses. Marvel is a company whose interests are driven to a degree by profit. Bryan Cooper Owens (2017) reminds us that racebending was a tactic Marvel employed to address criticisms of its nearly all white roster of superheroes. Additionally, as Ebony Elizabeth Thomas (2018) reminds, racebending was a fan creation before it was adopted by major studios. We are suggesting that teachers always consider how “diverse representation” is being positioned in texts, and who benefits from such positioning. We want teachers to see the curricular potential racebending has in fighting for justice in English curriculum. We also want teachers to be vigilant about the harm racial capitalism can play in text selections and teaching of literature. As we close this essay, we consider how conversations about racebending and racial capitalism can emerge in English language arts spaces.

Curricular Considerations

The differences between racebending and racial capitalism have implications for secondary English language arts curriculum, especially concerning graphic novels, middle grades, and young adult literature. Representation in a text without depth and nuance does little to challenge white supremacist beliefs that pulses through traditional English language arts curriculum. Equally as important, representation in a text paired with harmful pedagogy is alarming and dangerous. Texts that center Black

characters can, when approached without criticalness and careful pedagogy, reinforce deficit and trauma-based narratives that deny Black characters their full humanity and joy (McKinney, 2020; Reid, 2020). Similarly, a recent young adult literature trend of romantically pairing white queer characters with queer characters of Color without any nuance of the way racism operates for the queer characters of Color is little more than a “haphazard attempt at ‘diversity’” that is “almost insulting” (Monet, 2019). English teachers must be diligent in identifying the forces of racial capitalism in the emerging body of texts aimed at young people.

With a focus on secondary English classrooms, we offer the following suggestions for racebending texts to be considered in curriculum. In addition to titles, we consider commonly taught literature themes that these graphic novels could be placed alongside in novel study units.

Text	Summary	Thematic Connections
<i>Avengers Assembly: Orientation</i> by Preeti Chhibber and James Lancett	Kamala Khan joins Miles Morales (Spider-Man) and Doreen Green (Squirrel Girl) at the Avengers Institute. The text is a narration of their time as young superheroes coming to terms with their powers and responsibilities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The power of relationships ● Coming of age ● Being the new kid
<i>Green Lantern: Legacy</i> by Minh Lê and Angie Tong	Tai Pham inherits his grandmother’s jade ring, which turns him into the superhero Green Lantern. The title outlines how Tai must live up to his	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The meaning of family ● Coming of age ● Societal and familial

	grandmother’s legacy as he learns more about previous Green Lanterns.	expectations
<i>Miss Marvel Vol 1: No Normal</i> by G. Willow Wilson and Adrian Alphona	Kamala Khan’s life is dramatically altered when she’s bestowed the power of Miss Marvel. The title narrates Kamala’s struggle of being herself and holding the title of her famous predecessor.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Developing a sense of self ● Coming of age ● Seeking justice
<i>New Superman Vol 1: Made in China</i> by Gene Luen Yang, Viktor Bogdanovic, and Richard Friends	The Chinese government is forming their own version of the Justice League. Kong Kenan is selected to hold the mantle of Superman. The title documents the pressures of embodying the famous hero.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Societal pressures ● Coming of age ● Responsibility of having power

Conclusion

In writing about the now redacted canonical book covers, Jackson (2020) notes that it is “easier to paper over good books whose legacies are secure than to reexamine them” (para. 7). The same argument can be applied to the text selection process in English language arts curriculum. We believe a critical (re)examination of the texts we teach and how we

teach them is essential for redressing historical and contemporary harm enacted in English classrooms. Concepts like racial capitalism and racebending can offer analytical lenses to understand *who* is represented in our curriculum, *how* people and communities are presented, and *why* publishers and educators opt for such presentation.

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