



Digital Commons@

Loyola Marymount University
LMU Loyola Law School

Journal of Catholic Education

Volume 26 | Issue 1

Article 6

4-2023

The Beam in Our Own Eyes: Antiracism and YA Literature Through a Catholic Lens

Katie Sutton

John Carroll University

Abigail D. Grafmeyer

John Carroll University

Dan Reynolds

John Carroll University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/ce>



Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Language and Literacy Education Commons](#), [Religious Education Commons](#), and the [Secondary Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sutton, K., Grafmeyer, A., & Reynolds, D. (2023). The beam in our own eyes: Antiracism and YA literature through a Catholic lens. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 26(1), 102–118. <http://doi.org/10.15365/joce.2601062023>

This Education in Practice Article is brought to you for free with open access by the School of Education at Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for publication in *Journal of Catholic Education* by the journal's editorial board and has been published on the web by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information about Digital Commons, please contact digitalcommons@lmu.edu. To contact the editorial board of *Journal of Catholic Education*, please email JCE@nd.edu.

EDUCATION IN PRACTICE

The Beam in Our Own Eyes: Antiracism and Young Adult Literature Through a Catholic Lens

Katie Sutton¹, Abigail D. Grafmeyer¹ and Dan Reynolds¹

Abstract: As Catholic schools serve an increasingly racially diverse population of students, they must grapple with the critical requirement to address these students' unique needs while heeding the call from modern Catholic Church leaders to engage in explicit antiracist action. Using the Historically Responsive Literacy Framework (HRL), this article equips Catholic high school English language arts (ELA) teachers with practical and powerful ways to create antiracist curriculum. To do this effectively, we place antiracist Young Adult (YA) literature (both fiction and nonfiction) in conversation with Catholic canonical texts and modern voices from Catholic clergy members. By connecting with students' complex identities and creating authentic antiracist learning experiences, Catholic high school ELA teachers can better prepare their students to use both their knowledge and criticality of Catholic social teachings and their individual identities to combat racism.

Keywords: antiracist, curriculum, YA literature, HRL framework, high school, ELA, Catholic education

United States Catholic schools educate an increasingly racially and culturally diverse population: 21.5% of the 1.7 million Catholic school students are students of color (NCEA, 2021a). These demographic shifts have resulted in a “transforming genealogy” of racial diversity in many urban Catholic schools (LeBlanc, 2017b), and yet 87% of Catholic school teachers remain White (Sanchez, 2018). Given these demographics, Catholic school curricula are uniquely positioned to use Catholic social teaching to address social justice issues, specifically

¹ John Carroll University

racism, through antiracist work that actively dismantles deficit perspectives and uplifts the identities of students of color. Racism afflicts not only students of color but also White students, for whom forms of implicit and explicit racism can prevent awareness of and empathy for their peers of color who experience racism. For example, the parents of the only African American eighth grader at St. Joseph Catholic Grade School in New Jersey filed a lawsuit after their son faced racial slurs, encouragements of suicide, and a threatening drawing of a Ku Klux Klansman on his desk (Oglesby, 2018). A senior at a prestigious New York Catholic high school also detailed casual racism in his experience there (Harris, 2020). Regrettably, instances of racism like these continue to appear in Catholic schools across the country (see Neville, 2019, for more examples).

In the 2018 pastoral letter, *Open Wide Our Hearts*, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) explicitly calls on Catholic schools to act: “We charge our . . . educational institutions to break any silence around the issue of racism, to find new and creative ways to raise awareness, analyze curricula, and to teach the virtues of fraternal charity” (p. 26). This article directly takes up that call. The politicization of teaching about racism and other controversial topics in the classroom (e.g., the alleged use of Critical Race Theory in K-12 education; Christie, 2021) makes it a challenging environment for Catholic teachers to lead such discussions, yet we are called now more than ever to eradicate the oppression that continues to challenge our communities.

In pastoral letters from the USCCB and statements made by leaders of the clergy, the Church has continuously denounced racism and called for action. While the “love of neighbor which is the proof of love of God” is as compelling a reason as any to be antiracist, a more profound statement on the issue came from the USCCB (1968): “Catholics, like the rest of American society, must recognize their responsibility for allowing these conditions to persist . . . In varying degree, we all share the guilt.” Contemporary U.S. clergy continue to encourage Catholics to engage in anti-racism. Regarding the current attack on Critical Race Theory in schools, Patrick Saint-Jean (2021) states, “Catholic social teaching requires Catholics to be critical consumers of knowledge. We must engage with complex and even controversial issues using both our faith and intellect.” By engaging with these documents and continuing this call for criticality, we hope to pave the way for a productive and justice-focused curriculum in the ELA classroom.

Therefore, our aim is to equip Catholic high school English teachers and administrators with a theoretical framework for an ELA curriculum to address the growing need for deeper knowledge on empowering their diverse student population and to heed the call from modern Catholic Church leaders to engage in antiracist action within Catholic schools. We provide a rationale for antiracist English education, incorporate an intellectual framework that synthesizes research on literacy curriculum and Catholic social teaching, a curriculum map (Table 1) that places antiracist young adult (YA) literature together with both traditional and modern texts from Catholic leaders, and in-depth exploration of a single unit (Table 2) putting the language of YA literature and Catholic

texts in direct conversation. We do not present a finished curriculum, but we encourage Catholic school ELA teachers and leaders to use the framework and map in their own curriculum design. Ultimately, to support anti-racist Catholic educators, we take up the USCCB's call and demonstrate how texts in the Catholic tradition can enrich instruction when integrated with YA literature.

Theoretical Framework

This section details the sources that inform our theoretical framework and explains the reasoning behind our integration of Catholic and YA texts to showcase the potential impact this method could have in Catholic high school English classrooms.

Historically Responsive Literacy

We ground our work in the Historically Responsive Literacy framework (HRL; [Muhammad, 2020](#)). The HRL framework, like the culturally relevant, culturally responsive, and culturally sustaining theories that have preceded it (e.g., [Gay, 2018](#); [Ladson-Billings, 2022](#); [Paris, 2012](#)), seeks to respond to a student's culture and linguistic practices with instruction that will both nurture and expand those practices ([Muhammad, 2020](#)). HRL differs from its predecessors in that it specifically attends to the "literacy histories of Black people" ([Muhammad, 2020](#), p. 48), arguing that the historically rooted examples of Black literary societies focused on the uplift and growth of Black culture and community even when it was actively resisted by White Americans. The attention afforded to literacy history means that the framework can simultaneously respond to a student's history, identity, and language practices both past and present. This framework's specific emphasis on historical literacies is also particularly well-aligned with an antiracist vision that grapples with the historical legacies of racism in the United States and in the U.S. Catholic Church.

The goals of the HRL framework can be summarized in a four-part pedagogical approach: literacy as identity, skills, intellect, and criticality ([Muhammad, 2020](#)). Literacy skills describe how students need instruction on specific types of literacy skills, such as reading texts in different genres, writing persuasive arguments, or delivering effective oral presentations. The intellect aspect refers to building knowledge about the world: all texts are *about* something, and knowledge-building is crucial to growth in literacy. Literacy as identity describes how students see themselves or others reflected in the instruction, and especially focuses on what students learn about themselves—in our case, what students learn about their own faith identities alongside the intersections with other aspects of their identities. Finally, the criticality aspect causes students to think about power, justice, and equity—ideas with a long history in the critical literacy tradition of literacy education ([Luke, 2012](#)). These ideas are particularly aligned with Catholic social teaching about solidarity and the option for the poor and vulnerable ([USCCB, n.d.](#)). While the HRL framework is grounded in the history of Black literary societies, criticality can extend to any way students examine issues of power and injustice (e.g., poverty, sexism).

Ultimately, we employ all four aspects of HRL for our work because they shape the goals of personal faith and identity exploration (identity), developing reading and writing skills (skills), understanding the history of race and racism in the United States and in the U.S. Catholic Church (intellect), and critically inquiring about the role of racism in U.S. institutions and considering the implications for justice (criticality).

The Potential of YA Literature Within the HRL Framework

We define YA literature as texts that mirror the lived realities of middle and high school students and the issues that face them in their cultural, social, and personal contexts (Ivey & Johnston, 2013). The American Library Association (2008) notes that YA literature can also address the “evolutionary” needs of young people who are at a transitional, and often difficult, growing period (Cart, 2008). We chose to focus on YA literature because the genre matches the components of the HRL framework and often reflects Black students’ linguistic experiences. As Kinloch and Long (2020) explain, “Inside classrooms and throughout society, countless Black students are shamed for how they talk, walk, dress, breathe, think, live and look.” (p. ix). The youth-focused identity approach means that YA literature can help counteract that “shame” felt by Black students by accurately representing their linguistic practices (Kinloch & Long, 2020). Baker-Bell (2020) argues that Anti-Black Linguistic Racism is perpetuated in education via the attitude of teachers who hold the assumption “that Black students are linguistically, morally and intellectually inferior because they communicate in Black Language” (p. 22). We encourage Catholic school teachers to consider how linguistic racism might be operating in their classrooms—and we would recommend teachers reading Baker-Bell (2020), Lee (1995; 2012), or Metz (2017) to ensure that their implementation of this curriculum does not reinforce Anti-Black linguistic racism. Ultimately, we selected YA works featuring Black characters who speak Black Language to present these linguistic circumstances as natural, relatable, and recognizable to their students of color and White students alike.

Finally, the broad definition of YA literature means the genre includes nonfiction as well. Some authors choose to adapt versions of their already-published novels to connect to young adults. Notable nonfiction YA literature adaptations include *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson, *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* by Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi, and *Enrique’s Journey* by Sonia Nazario. These works explain, for example, the complexity of the U.S. justice system or of immigration laws to unfamiliar young readers. Nonfiction remains important to building students’ skills and intellect, especially considering the differences between Reading: Literature (RL) and Reading: Informational Text (RI) standards outlined by the Common Core Standards used in most states. Teachers should incorporate both informational and fictional texts to not only build students’ content knowledge and literacy skills but also to attend to the building of their students’ identity and criticality.

The popularity of YA texts featuring racially diverse characters suggests that young adults desire and appreciate seeing racial identities represented in what they read. For example, the 2020 Goodreads

Choice Awards for “Best Young Adult Fiction”, with over 280,000 votes, selected Elizabeth Acevedo’s *Clap When You Land*, which features two Dominican girls. Of the 19 other nominees, 10 feature main characters of color; four detail the specific experiences of Black youth (“Best Young Adult Fiction,” 2020). The popularity of *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas—a YA novel about Black teenagers facing police brutality and engaging in subsequent activism—is evident in its over 80-week span on *The New York Times* bestseller list. The plots of these works also provide a way for students to be exposed to critical social issues such as police relations, intersectional identities, conflict in social class, or other forms of prejudice and bullying (Ivey & Johnston, 2018). Scholars have argued that YA literature has a particular power to engage students about justice issues (Wolk, 2009) and about deep moral tensions (Ivey & Johnston, 2018). While stereotypical views of YA literature might consider such works to be shallow and driven by plot (e.g., romance, crime), quality YA literature instruction has been linked to students’ moral agency and more nuanced moral stances as they read and discuss moral issues that face teens today (Ivey & Johnston, 2013).

Catholic Texts and Antiracist Catholic ELA Instruction

To accompany our HRL framework’s pedagogical perspective, we draw on our theological perspective. For our curriculum design, we define Catholic texts as those published by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) or those by or about members of the clergy. We recognize that lay authors also contribute to the discussion about the U.S. Catholic church’s response to racism, but we also want our students to hear voices that come with the church’s teaching authority. We rely on the USCCB’s pastoral letters because they retain the authority of the Catholic Church in the United States. The Catholic texts we analyze date back to the 1950s and continue through contemporary writings. These modern texts present authentic voices and often include personal accounts of clergy members of color who have experienced racism, violence, and oppression. The dichotomy of 20th and 21st-century perspectives presents us with an opportunity to respond with critical reflection and action. Not only can we explore the historical details of how the Catholic Church responded or failed to respond to racism in the past, but we can supplement with connections to the Church’s current perspective on racism.

We have chosen texts to assist with the development of a student’s criticality and their religious identity. We acknowledge that approximately 20% of U.S. Catholic school students are not Catholic, but Catholic schools have a responsibility to attempt to develop all their students’ faith identities in the light of Catholic faith education. The National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) outlines standards for a Catholic school’s mission statement, which includes an embracing of “a Catholic identity rooted in Gospel values . . . and committed to faith formation”, as well as “a total academic curriculum that integrates faith, culture, and life” (NCEA, 2021b). Benchmark 2.5 of the NCEA’s standards states that teachers should “use the lenses of Scripture and the Catholic intellectual tradition in all subjects to help students think critically and ethically about the world around them”

(NCEA, 2021b). We also rely on the U.S. Catholic intellectual tradition in the form of pastoral letters and reflections from clergy who are well-versed in an understanding of Catholicism; both also frequently include instances of Scripture, consistent with the NCEA benchmark.

Catholic texts hold particular promise for integrating all four components of the HRL framework. Students can develop skills and intellect by analyzing the history of the Catholic Church through the language of pastoral letters, as well as through reflections of modern clergy. They can engage with their religious identities by placing connecting texts to their own lives and faith practices. Finally, students can practice criticality by posing questions of power and oppression about the Catholic Church's relationship with racism. The 1979 Pastoral Letter on Racism "Brothers and Sisters to Us" issued the call for the Church to "speak out . . . in every school" (USCCB) against racism—and that speaking out can occur directly in the classroom.

Research on Catholic Identity in ELA classrooms

A small body of conceptual and empirical work has outlined the promise and peril of using Catholic social teaching and Catholic texts to frame the work of English instruction in Catholic secondary schools. Jarvie and Burke (2015) argue that Catholic English classrooms have the "unique charge of a Charism that suggests Catholic spaces must engage with the moral and the difficult" (p. 82), particularly as standardized testing tends to commodify English instruction. Macaluso (2019) noted the possibilities of seeing literary reading as a spiritual act of "literary communion" (p. 134). Neville (2019) laid out a history of racism in the U.S. Catholic Church and proposed interdisciplinary frameworks for possible ways that Catholic school curricula could take on an antiracist stance. These ideas suggest that Catholic schools' English curriculum can draw on the power of Catholic identity to engage students with critical moral and religious questions.

In studies of Catholic schools and classrooms, LeBlanc (2015, 2017a, 2017b, 2019) studied how students and teachers appropriated the language of the Mass and of educational prayer to deepen understandings of literacy woven into adolescents' Catholic identities. This suggests promise for the ways Catholic liturgy and texts can be curricularized in secondary classrooms. However, several studies have documented how Catholic school students re-appropriate racialized language and stereotypes to reproduce racism. Burke and Gilbert (2016) point out that even in Catholic schools ostensibly committed to Catholic values, racism both explicit and implicit created a school culture that marginalized Black students. In an ELA-specific example, LeBlanc (2017b) noted that students in one urban Catholic school "invoked religious rationale and identities in their completion of coursework [but] it was not in keeping with the explicit intent of the assignment" (p. 105). These students used pre-existing racialized language and stereotypes to exclude Black students from full participation. Therefore, teachers enacting antiracist Catholic ELA instruction must consider both the promise of drawing on Catholic texts and liturgical practice, but also the possibility of students resisting the instruction and re-inscribing racism.

Methods

Here, we detail: (1) our positionalities in our racial, religious, and English education backgrounds (2) how we selected our YA and Catholic texts, and (3) how we integrated the texts into a teachable curriculum framework. This three-step process is also designed to show White Catholic high school English teachers—who might be new to this work—how to lay strong foundations for anti-racist work to resist possible pushback.

Positionality

We are three White English teachers and researchers at different stages of our careers. Reflecting on our previous and current teaching practices, we saw gaps where we fell short of tapping into the interests and strengths of our students of color. Sharing a background in the Catholic faith, we also believe we have a responsibility to reflect critically on the work of the Church. This article's title originates from Matthew 7:5: when Jesus specifically addresses the hypocrisy of moral preaching without self-interrogation. We interpret this as a call to reflect on our Whiteness. If we are educators in Catholic schools, we have a particular responsibility to care for our students in ways that align with Church teachings and the message of the Gospel.

On an individual experience level, we range from a pre-service teacher to veteran teacher educator. Katie is a White, female pre-service 7-12 ELA teacher, currently in student teaching, striving to include culturally relevant pedagogies. She is motivated to use her education to honor the presence of all students in her future classroom—particularly those on the margins and those who have previously suffered oppression and racism. She maintains an active faith in the Catholic Church; she hopes to help others understand the truth of Catholic social teaching, especially in Catholic schools.

Abby is a White, cisgender female who was raised Catholic and attended Catholic and Jesuit schools from kindergarten through graduate school and taught English in Catholic high schools for four years. While the Jesuit focus on social justice has always been a foundation of her teaching practice, her current work as a graduate student has prompted her to reconsider past curriculum and reflect on how an antiracist approach could have transformed the ELA curriculum, especially considering the potential harm it caused for her Black students and the lost opportunities to build meaningful antiracist communities within her classroom.

Dan was an English teacher and administrator in urban Catholic high schools for seven years, has been in teacher education for an additional 10 years and is currently a teacher educator and English education researcher at a Catholic university. Part of this work is his responsibility to interrogate his own history of his past ELA teaching, which was primarily done in a colorblind way, focusing exclusively on the literary merits of works (e.g. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*) without attending to his students' lived experiences of race or interrogating the racial perspectives implicit in works of literature. His current teaching and research work explores adolescent literacy pedagogy across the curriculum in both Catholic and public schools.

Young Adult and Catholic Text Selection

To choose the YA texts, we searched through award-winning texts from popular YA fiction including award lists from the Young Adult Library Services Association and the International Literacy Association's Young Adult Choices. We started with these lists not merely for popularity but because they offer opportunities to select contemporary literature which will engage students in discussions of moral issues, specifically around racism as it appears in the United States today. As we looked for texts, we maintained a strong preference for authors who identify as Black, but we also considered ways in which Blackness can be transnational and considered authors who might identify as multiracial, Afro-Dominican (like Elizabeth Acevedo), whose transnational experiences of race do not fit into typical U.S. definitions (like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie), and considered collaborations between authors with differing racial backgrounds (such as graphic novels). Alongside considering the authors' backgrounds, we also selected texts in which the protagonist grapples with racial identities on an individual level and considers the implications of systemic racism. Given that the Common Core ELA standards also encourage substantial reading in nonfiction, we also considered nonfiction texts adapted for YA use. Nonfiction texts also offer particular opportunities for interrogating single-story narratives often included in U.S. history courses (Tschida & Buchanan, 2015).

To choose the Catholic texts, we began with the USCCB's collection of six statements about racism, dating to 1958, 1963, 1979, 2004, 2013, and 2018, with a particular focus on the most recent statement, *Open Wide Our Hearts* (USCCB, 2018). We also included eleven statements and letters from bishops as well as four press releases, which date from 1984 to 2017, also retrieved from the USCCB's website. Knowing, however, that dialogue and ideas on race in America have shifted even since the most recent of these documents (2018)—especially during the summer of 2020 after the murder of George Floyd and national protests—we also wanted to sample current thinking in 2022, and so we sought articles from Catholic press which discussed issues of integrating race in curriculum, including some of the current U.S. debate about critical race theory, eventually including articles from outlets like *America*, *The Jesuit Post*, *National Review*, *Franciscan Media*, and the *National Catholic Reporter*.

Text Integration and Curriculum

We build on the work of Neville (2019), whose chapter provided lists of possible texts and activities to integrate antiracist work in classrooms across disciplines. Given that the HRL framework defines "text" as going far beyond merely printed texts (Muhammad, 2020), we encourage readers who want to incorporate more multimodal work to examine Neville's (2019) book chapter, which discusses how visual texts, and historical and theological artifacts can serve as texts within anti-racist Catholic school curriculum design. We build on that work, however, by drilling deeper into the YA texts and showing how, in the fictional texts, the adolescent characters' ongoing identity construction related to race and faith are paralleled in the Catholic texts' views of race in America. This particularly targets the identity aspect of the HRL framework (Muhammad, 2020). For the nonfiction texts, we

sought ways in which the YA-adapted narratives challenged official narratives of U.S. history and government, particularly targeting the criticality aspect of the HRL framework (Muhammad, 2020).

Results

Our results detail how we integrated the YA and the Catholic texts into a functional tool for Catholic educators. We created both the backbone of the semester-long curriculum to show what this could look like in a Catholic school ELA class (Table 1) and present individual quotes and language (Table 2) so Catholic ELA teachers can see how the language of the YA texts and that of the Catholic texts interact.

Ideally, conversation within and around these texts would be framed in curricular activities, but planning those activities is beyond our scope. We refer readers to Neville (2019), who proposes interdisciplinary activities such as constructing maps of racism across different aspects of contemporary U.S. life (e.g., schooling, housing, or religion) and connecting that map to the USCCB's definition of racism in *Open Wide Our Hearts* while also offering a critical perspective on ways in which the pastoral letter stops short of embracing a fully antiracist perspective. Activities like these and others, in combination with our text integrations, would be a strong way to build a full curriculum around these ideas.

Curricular Frameworks for Three Units

Table 1 details a curriculum map with three unit-length examples of YA (both fiction and non-fiction) and Catholic text sets that can be used by teachers with antiracist goals. For each unit, we include "criticality questions," which connect back to Muhammad's (2020) HRL framework that underlies our paper. Questions of criticality ask, "How will my instructions engage students' thinking about power and equity and the disruption of oppression?" (Muhammad, 2020, p. 58). By asking relevant critical questions about all of the texts in the unit, teachers and students can answer this question with a holistic perspective on the past and the present.

The difference in questions across the three rows of Table 1 also shows that criticality has a dual meaning. Because systematic oppression victimizes both the oppressor and oppressed (albeit in very different ways), some of our questions prompt students to consider when a person or a structure acted as the oppressor and others bring attention to those who have been oppressed (Freire, 2000). Antiracist and Catholic social justice goals are met when criticality "humanizes instruction and makes it more compassionate" (Muhammad, 2020, p. 117) for teachers and students to take action in and outside the classroom. Teachers should pose the criticality questions for the YA literature at the beginning of their unit and introduce the Catholic texts and corresponding criticality questions after students have developed proper contextual understanding to fully engage with the Catholic texts.

Our first YA fictional text, Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give*, is widely used in U.S. classrooms. Because this book addresses nuances of systemic racism and traumas of police brutality on a Black community from the perspective of a Black teenager, students of color may connect with similar experiences while also addressing a heavy topic that White students may have little experience of. Similarly, Nic Stone's *Dear Martin* contains a storyline focusing on police brutality and injustice while connecting historical racism through the letters the main character, Justyce, writes to Martin Luther King Jr. as he tries to process his experiences. We explain more about this selection and how to use it in the classroom in our focus unit section below. As a nonfiction text, we selected *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You*, a young adult rewrite of the critically acclaimed book that presents an approachable history of racism and the systems that keep it in place. This book allows teachers to build students' historical knowledge around the topic of U.S. systemic racism and challenges students to think critically about racial injustices.

The four historical statements on racism from the UCCSB both contain remarks on systemic racism inside and outside the Church while also skirting around these issues. Students must understand how the Catholic Church has both addressed systemic racism and perpetuated it throughout history including actions such as: denying Black Catholics access to Catholic schools, creating separate Black Catholic churches in communities, permitting some 20th-century religious orders to enforce racial segregation, and maintaining an overall "lack of passion" regarding segregation and racism when compared to the fervor for other Catholic social teaching issues like abortion (Massingale, 2014, p. 77). To further deepen these discussions, we include voices of members of the Church who have experienced racism both as Black men in America and as Black clergy members in the Catholic Church.

In conversation with *The Hate U Give*, we include two articles, one from Fr. Patrick St. Jean, S.J., a Black Jesuit theologian, and one from Fr. Chris Kellerman, S.J., a White Jesuit researcher. Their articles make clear connections between the Catholic teachings of social justice and the effects of systemic racism on Black Communities in the United States. We included these contemporary articles with *The Hate U Give* as students and teachers will be able to discuss different approaches to attempting to eradicate systemic racism and how our identities—particularly our racial ones—can both hinder and be an asset to us standing up and speaking out. *The Hate U Give*'s main character, Starr, is Black, but her boyfriend, Chris, is White; the novel's subplot about Chris's role offers both White and Black students mirrors and windows into how our identities position us in the struggle for racial justice.

With *Dear Martin* we wanted the Catholic texts to reflect both the historical significance of systemic racism and bring in a modern perspective from the Catholic Church. Susan Hinds-Brigger's profile of Deacon Art Miller gives a detailed look at the life of a prominent Black clergy member and the systemic racism he has experienced both outside and inside the Church. Historically, while *Brothers and Sisters to Us* was written a decade after Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, it was the most prominent statement made on racism from the Church in the

Table 1
Examples of YA and Catholic Text Pairings

YA Literature Focus	Criticality Questions	Catholic Texts to Accompany YA Text	Criticality Questions
<i>The Hate U Give</i> by Angie Thomas	When and how can someone speak out on racism? How does silence allow racism to occur? How can our understanding of our own identities help us be antiracists?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Oh, God of Justice, Come to Our Aid: Fighting the Enduring Epidemic of Systemic Racism” Fr. Patrick St. Jean, S.J. (June 29, 2020, in <i>NCR</i>) • “Catholic 101: Church Teaching and the Anti-Racism Movement” Fr. Chris Kellerman, S.J. (July 30, 2020, in <i>The Jesuit Post</i>) 	How do beliefs of White supremacy perpetuate systemic racism? Police brutality? How does the Church address or not address White supremacy? What’s the difference between “righteous” anger and “violent” anger?
<i>Dear Martin</i> by Nic Stone	How does Justice’s experience show the effects of internalized racism? How does implicit bias perpetuate racism?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Brothers and Sisters to Us</i> by the USCCB (1979) • “A Catholic Response to Racism” by Susan Hinds-Brigger about Deacon Art Miller (2021) 	How does racism “blot out the image of God?” Why might the Church’s committee against racism be titled “ad hoc?” What does the Church have the power to change besides publishing statements?
<i>Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You</i> by Ibram X. Kendi and Jason Reynolds	How might learning about the source of racist ideas help you to know the present and yourself?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excerpts from chapter 2 of <i>Racial Justice and the Catholic Church</i> “An Analysis of Catholic Social Teaching on Racism” by Bryan Massingale (2014) • Excerpts from the four USCCB pastoral letters on racism: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ <i>Discrimination and the Christian Conscience</i> (1958) ◦ <i>The National Race Crisis</i> (1968) ◦ <i>Brothers and Sisters to Us</i> (1979) ◦ <i>Open Wide Our Hearts</i> (2018) 	How has the Catholic Church both acted as an oppressor and also advocated for change when it comes to racism? How do we as Catholics and members of Catholic schools respond to the call to be antiracists? How has the 20th and 21st century history of race in the United States as a whole connected to the 20th and 21st century history of Catholic responses to racial issues?

years after the Civil Rights Movement up until 2018. Using this text, students and teachers can discuss both the historical progress—and the lack of progress—that we have seen, and that Justyce describes in his letters. Students might make similar comparisons to the progress—and the lack of progress—in the Church’s anti-racist work over the last several decades.

For *Stamped*, we included all four USCCB statements about racism, in addition to historical context and commentary from Fr. Bryan Massingale’s book *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*. As a Black Catholic priest, Fr. Massingale brings a critical voice and clearly explains the circumstances surrounding the release of each of these statements. Teachers and students will have ample opportunity to compare what each statement says (and how it is said) about the Church’s stance and approach to systemic racism.

Focus Unit: Exploring *Dear Martin* and *Brothers and Sisters to Us* in Depth

To provide a comprehensive and detailed view of a curricular unit, we provide a focus unit example in [Table 2](#). We specifically highlight the connections between the YA text *Dear Martin* by [Nic Stone \(2018\)](#) and the Catholic texts *Brothers and Sisters to Us* by the [USCCB \(1979\)](#) and “A Catholic Response to Racism” from Deacon Art Miller ([Hines-Brigger, 2021](#)). *Dear Martin* follows 17-year-old Justyce, a Black student in his senior year at a predominantly White preparatory high school. At the beginning of the novel, Justyce is mistakenly arrested by a White officer who misinterprets his attempts to help his ex-girlfriend into her car as car theft or assault. After recovering from being handcuffed for hours and verbally abused by the officer, Justyce spends the rest of the book writing letters to Martin Luther King Jr. to unpack his experiences with racism.

We chose *Dear Martin* because of its first-person narrative and vivid youth voice seen through classroom dialogue transcripts and the journal entries. When compared to the three other statements made by the [USCCB \(1958, 1968, and 2018\)](#), *Brothers and Sisters to Us* is “a strongly worded document that forcefully and unequivocally condemns racism in its contemporary manifestations as an evil and a sin” ([Massingale, 2014](#)). By including a historical perspective from the Church, we invite students to grapple with inheriting the traditions of civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. Pairing this text with a 2021 response to racism, specifically one profiling a Black Catholic Church leader and the racism he experienced as a member of the Church, will allow students to look critically at the range of the Church’s response to racism and build profound context for reading *Dear Martin*.

[Table 2](#) highlights direct quotes from each text and the connections teachers can use to enhance discussions. The first and second columns contain quotes from *Dear Martin* and the Catholic texts *Brothers and Sisters to Us* and “A Catholic Response to Racism” respectively that mirror one another in language or theme. The third column lists possible connections that can be made when we read across the table.

Table 2*Quotes and Connections for Dear Martin*

YA Text	Catholic Texts	Connections
<p><i>Dear Martin</i> by Nic Stone (2018): “Last night changed me. I don’t wanna walk around all pissed off and looking for problems, but I know I can’t continue to pretend nothing’s wrong. Yeah, there are no more ‘colored’ water fountains, and it’s supposed to be illegal to discriminate, but if I can be forced to sit on the concrete in too-tight cuffs when I’ve done nothing wrong, it’s clear there’s an issue. That things aren’t as equal as folks say they are” (p. 47).</p>	<p><i>Brothers and Sisters to Us</i> by the USCCB (1979): “Let the Church speak out, not only in the assemblies of the bishops, but in every diocese and parish in the land, in every chapel and religious house, in every school, in every social service agency, and in every institution that bears the name Catholic.”</p> <p>“A Catholic Response to Racism,” an Interview with Deacon Art Miller by Susan Hines-Brigger (2021): “[The Church] needs to do something. And I don’t mean issuing another paper. We need to form a community of action . . . The Church is a direct reflection of our society, and our society is institutionally racist. The problem is our Church is supposed to redirect and heal our society and our society is supposed to be a reflection of the Church, but it isn’t.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counters a Black youth’s experience with racism (in his own voice) with the Catholic Church’s call to action • Provides a look at the Church’s response historically and how their actions have been received by members within the Church
<p><i>Dear Martin</i> by Nic Stone (2018): “Dear Martin: You know, I don’t get how you did it. Just being straight up. Everyday I walk through the hall of that elitist-ass school, I feel like I don’t belong there, and every time Jared or one of them opens their damn mouth, I’m reminded they agree . . . What do I do when my very identity is being mocked by people who refuse to admit there’s a problem?” (p. 95)</p>	<p><i>Brothers and Sisters to Us</i> by the USCCB (1979): “Racism is a sin: a sin that divides the human family, blots out the image of God among specific members of that family, and violates the fundamental human dignity of those called to be children of the same Father.”</p> <p>“A Catholic Response to Racism,” an Interview with Deacon Art Miller by Susan Hines-Brigger (2021): “Maybe it would make a significant statement that they have this regular committee on racism. The fact that it’s ad hoc means it will end. Racism hasn’t ended for 400 years.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Justyce’s internalized racism and dueling identities come across clearly • Having an ad hoc committee makes it seem like racism will end, but it hasn’t for 400 years, even with decades of efforts

Discussion and Implications

Building on existing ideas about incorporating difficult moral, ethical, and racial questions in Catholic ELA curriculum (Burke & Gilbert, 2016; Neville, 2019), we show how Catholic high school ELA teachers can create antiracist curriculum consistent with Catholic social teaching. Research shows that YA literature offers students a unique opportunity to connect with and learn from characters as they struggle with difficult experiences that students may or may not have already dealt with in their own lives (Bishop, 1990; Tschida et al., 2015). With a teacher's guidance, reading nonfiction YA literature like *Stamped* gives students an accessible history of racism in the United States, while YA fiction like *Dear Martin* and *The Hate U Give* allows all students a safe place to grapple with realistic experiences of racism, dueling identities, code-switching, and implicit bias.

The limitations of our work require a precautionary note. Many forces may conspire against teachers implementing antiracist ELA curriculum in Catholic schools: persistent examples of racism in U.S. Catholic schools (e.g. Neville, 2019), resistance to any consideration of Critical Race Theory instruction in Catholic schools (Christie, 2021), and adolescent Catholic school students re-appropriating racialized language and stereotypes even when the school and curriculum discourage it (Burke & Gilbert, 2016; LeBlanc, 2017b). We urge teachers to be upfront about their antiracist goals with their students, families, and administration, and to use the USCCB's calls for action as the clear endorsements of anti-racist curricula that they are. We also believe that this curriculum framework could be extended to a fully built curriculum—funders or teacher groups might consider commissioning such a curriculum with educative curriculum materials to promote Catholic school ELA teachers' learning (Davis & Krajcik, 2005; Davis et al., 2017).

Ultimately, Catholic school students must understand how their identities affect their approach to understanding complex topics, including connections between race and Catholicism. Students' religious identities are frequently explored in theology classes and through campus ministry but are not often authentically integrated into their core classes, nor connected to their racial identities. Even more, some parents and members of Catholic school communities are divided about how race and racism should be addressed in the classroom. We believe this makes it all the more important to bring in USCCB texts strongly calling for Catholics to combat racism. The next generation of clergy and lay leaders, many of whom are students in our Catholic schools, must be able to critically examine the history of the U.S. Catholic Church and ask how much we have done, how much we could have done, and how much we can do to eradicate racism. To make a lasting impact, Catholic schools must heed the call to engage students in important and empowering conversations on racism in our Church and in our nation.

References

- Baker-Bell, A. (2020). *Linguistic justice: Black language, literacy, identity, and pedagogy*. Routledge.
- Bishop, R.S. (1990). Windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors. *Perspectives*, 6(3). <https://scenicregional.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Mirrors-Windows-and-Sliding-Glass-Doors.pdf>
- Burke, K. J., & Gilbert, B. R. (2016). Racing tradition: Catholic schooling and the maintenance of boundaries. *Race, Ethnicity, and Education*, 19(3), 524–545. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2015.1013461>
- Cart, M. (2008). *The value of young adult literature*. Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA). <https://www.ala.org/yalsa/guidelines/whitepapers/yalit>
- Christie, G.K. (2021). Catholic schools are no place for critical race theory. *National Review*. <https://www.nationalreview.com/2021/05/catholic-schools-are-no-place-for-critical-race-theory/>
- Davis, E. A., & Krajcik, J. S. (2005). Designing educative curriculum materials to promote teacher learning. *Educational researcher*, 34(3), 3–14. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X034003003>
- Davis, E. A., Palincsar, A. S., Smith, P. S., Arias, A. M., & Kademian, S. M. (2017). Educative curriculum materials: Uptake, impact, and implications for research and design. *Educational Researcher*, 46(6), 293–304. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X17727502>
- Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. 30th anniversary ed. New York, Continuum.
- Gay, G. (2018). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. Teachers College Press.
- Goodreads. (2020). *Best young adult fiction 2020*. <https://www.goodreads.com/choiceawards/best-young-adult-fiction-books-2020>
- Harris, R. (September, 2020). *This is the casual racism that I face at my elite high school*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/24/nyregion/regis-catholic-school-racism.html>
- Hines-Brigger, S. (February, 2021). *A Catholic response to racism*. Franciscan Media. <https://www.franciscanmedia.org/st-anthony-messenger/february-2021/a-catholic-response-to-racism>
- International Literacy Association. (2020). *Young adults' choices reading list*. <https://www.literacyworldwide.org/get-resources/reading-lists/young-adults-choices-reading-list>
- Ivey, G., & Johnston, P. (2018). Engaging disturbing books. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 62(2), 143–150. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26632910>
- Ivey, G., & Johnston, P. H. (2013). Engagement with young adult literature: Outcomes and processes. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 48(3), 255–275. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.46>
- Jarvie, S., & Burke, K. (2015). Difficult knowledge and the English classroom: A Catholic framework using Cormac McCarthy's "The Road." *Journal of Catholic Education*, 19(1), 76–94. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1076585>
- Kinloch, V. & Long, S. (2020). Series editors' foreword. In Baker-Bell, A., *Linguistic justice: Black language, literacy, identity, and pedagogy*. pp. ix–x. Routledge.

- Ladson-Billings, G. (2022). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children* (3rd ed.). John Wiley & Sons.
- LeBlanc, R. J. (2015). Performance and apprehension of the Mass in an urban Catholic school: Strategy, liturgy, capital. *Written Communication*, 32(3), 254–285. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741088315587904>
- LeBlanc, R. J. (2017a). Literacy rituals in the community and the classroom. *Language Arts*, 95(2), 77–86. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44809941>
- LeBlanc, R. J. (2017b). The interactional production of race and religious identity in an urban Catholic school. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 21(1), 84–110. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.2101052017>
- LeBlanc, R. J. (2019). Teaching while praying, praying while teaching: An interactional sociolinguistics of educational prayer. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 22(1), 84–111. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.2201052019>
- Lee, C. D. (2012). Signifying in the zone of proximal development. In H. Daniels (Ed.) *An Introduction to Vygotsky*, (pp. 259–289). Routledge.
- Lee, C. D. (1995). A culturally based cognitive apprenticeship: Teaching African American high school students skills in literary interpretation. *Reading Research Quarterly* 30(4), 608–630. <https://doi.org/10.2307/748192>
- Luke, A. (2012). Critical literacy: Foundational notes. *Theory Into Practice*, 51(1), 4–11. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2012.636324>
- Macaluso, K. (2019). Entering into literary communion: Nourishing the soul and reclaiming mystery through reading. In Juzwik M. M., Stone, J. C., Burke, K. J., & Davila, D., (Eds) *Legacies of Christian languaging and literacies in American education*, (pp. 131–134). Routledge.
- Massingale, B. N. (2014). *Racial justice and the Catholic Church*. Orbis Books.
- Metz, M. (2017). Addressing English teachers' concerns about decentering Standard English. *English Teaching: Practice & Critique*, 16(3), 363–374. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ETPC-05-2017-0062>
- Muhammad, G. (2020). *Cultivating genius: An equity framework for culturally and historically responsive literacy*. Scholastic.
- NCEA. (2021a, December). *Data brief: 2021-2022 Catholic school enrollment*. National Catholic Educational Association. https://images.magnetmail.net/images/clients/NCEA1/attach/Data_Brief_22_Catholic_School_Enrollment_v4.pdf
- NCEA. (2021b). *Mission and Catholic identity*. National Catholic Educational Association. https://ncea.org/NSBECS/The_Standards/Mission_and_Catholic_Identity/NSBECS/Standards/Mission_and_Catholic_Identity.aspx?hkey=a2e11a75-29bd-4635-a6a1-f72e58a51bfa
- Neville, M. L. (2019). “Racism is a god-damned thing”: The implications of historical and contemporary Catholic racism for ELA classrooms. In Juzwik M. M., Stone, J. C., Burke, K. J., & Davila, D., (Eds) *Legacies of Christian Languaging and Literacies in American Education*, (pp. 82–95). Routledge.

- Oglesby, A. (2018, June 22). *Racial slurs, KKK note, bullying alleged in Toms River Catholic School lawsuit*. Asbury Park Press. <https://www.app.com/story/news/education/2018/06/22/st-joes-student-racial-slurs-lawsuit/721673002/>
- Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher*, 41(3), 93–97. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X12441244>
- Saint-Jean, P. (2021, July 20). *Critical race theory and Catholicism go hand in hand*. U.S. Catholic: Faith in Real Life. <https://uscatholic.org/articles/202107/critical-race-theory-and-catholicism-go-hand-in-hand/>
- Sanchez, B. (2018, September 21). *Catholic schools challenged by changing demographics*. America Magazine. <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2018/09/21/catholic-schools-challenged-changing-demographics>
- Stone, N. (2018). *Dear Martin*. Ember.
- Tschida, C. M. & Buchanan, L. B. (2015). Tackling controversial topics: Developing thematic text sets for elementary social studies. *Social Studies Research and Practice*, 10(3), 40–56. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SSRP-03-2015-B0003>
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. (USCCB; n.d.). Seven themes of Catholic social teaching. <https://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/seven-themes-of-catholic-social-teaching>
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. (USCCB; 1958). Discrimination and Christian conscience. <https://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/cultural-diversity/african-american/resources/upload/Discrimination-Christian-Conscience-Nov-14-1958.pdf>
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. (USCCB; 1968). Statement on national race crisis. <https://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/cultural-diversity/african-american/resources/upload/Statement-on-National-Race-Crisis-April-25-1968.pdf>
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. (USCCB; 1979). Brothers and sisters to us. <https://www.usccb.org/committees/african-american-affairs/brothers-and-sisters-us>
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. (USCCB; 2018). Open wide our hearts: The enduring call to love—a pastoral letter against racism. https://www.usccb.org/resources/open-wide-our-hearts_0.pdf
- Wolk, S. (2009). Reading for a better world: Teaching for social responsibility with young adult literature. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 52(8), 664–673. <https://doi.org/10.1598/JAAL.52.8.2>
- YALSA book and media awards for libraries. (2021). *Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA)*. American Library Association. <https://www.yalsa.org/thehub/2021/01/27/2021-yalsa-book-award-winners-honors/>