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# Demystifying immigrant youth representations : a look at mainstream and immigrant perspectives within literature and media

Carrie Natsu Kawahatsu  
*Ryerson University*

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DEMISTIFYING IMMIGRANT YOUTH REPRESENTATIONS:  
A LOOK AT MAINSTREAM AND IMMIGRANT PERSPECTIVES WITHIN  
LITERATURE AND MEDIA

by

Carrie Natsu Kawahatsu, BA, BEd, California State University, Sacramento 2000, 2002

A Major Research Paper  
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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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in the Program of  
Immigration and Settlement Studies

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Master of Arts, 2009  
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Ryerson University

ABSTRACT

Firstly, this paper analyses two mainstream films, *Gran Torino* and *Entre les Murs* (The Class) and looks at how depictions of immigrant youth are often negative and perpetuate stereotypes and racist ideologies. Through the lens of whiteness, I will argue that mainstream media plays an important role in maintaining white hegemony by othering people of colour, in particular, immigrant youth. Secondly, the paper analyses immigrant produced media and literary works and explores how they can offer powerful narratives that critique and analyze issues of social inequality. Utilizing Freire's idea of "conscientization," I contend that youth learn to raise awareness of oppressive conditions within their community and problematize those conditions within society. The counter-narratives that immigrant youth develop refute "othered" identities by moving the focus away from the white dominant voice.

Key Words: counter-narratives, immigrant youth, mainstream media representations, othering, white dominant voice

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## INTRODUCTION

I could never articulate how I felt growing up as a “fourth generation Japanese American” in the United States. I left the country when I was twenty five years old, because I was always told to “go back to my country” and never really felt like I belonged in America. So in search of “my country,” I moved to Japan. I realized very quickly that I was not Japanese and that finding “my country” was going to be a lot harder than I thought. Now, as I am writing this paper, I find myself in Canada as an international student, completing graduate studies and applying to become a landed immigrant.

When I first came to Toronto, I went to an Asian Arts Freedom School show where artists of Asian descent celebrated together with stories and poems, film and art. It was the first time in my life that I had witnessed a group of individuals of colour articulate themselves so profoundly. They told stories, recited poems and sang songs that I could genuinely relate to and felt inspired by. They contested conventional ways of thinking compelled the audience to question the status quo. As I sat watching and listening to these people, I wondered, “Where did these people come from? How did they cultivate such powerful voices? And how can I learn to articulate myself in this way?” This began my search to find more stories and draw attention to them, because they felt so important to me. In witnessing their voices and being part of their collective stories, I felt like I had “come home” for the first time. I have come to realize that for me, “my country” does not exist. As Eve Ensler notes, “We are all essentially permanently displaced people” (2008). However, there are spaces such as poems or stories by marginalized individuals that can be a safe place for people like me, and other yellow and brown people, who can never feel at home in places where they’re told to “go back to their own country.”

In my search to find stories and expressions by marginalized youth, I came to realize that these voices were consistently silenced. Their voices are suppressed by the daily onslaught of

little power and resources (Friedman, 1995). Through the lens of whiteness, I will argue that mainstream media plays an important role in maintaining white hegemony by othering people of colour, in particular, immigrant youth. The use of particular representations in the media constructs an ideology in which the subordinate group is demonised and dehumanized (Gabbard, 2000).

The second part of this study is an analysis of media and literary works produced by youth of colour and immigrant youth. Most of the work analyzed in this section is produced by immigrant youth living in Western countries, primarily in Canada. The immigrant youth I will refer to throughout the study either immigrated as children or adolescents or as children of first generation immigrants, and are known as first and second generation immigrant youth, respectively. The analyses will focus on the way in which these works can offer powerful narratives that critique and analyze issues of social inequality. Utilizing Freire's (1970) idea of "conscientization," I contend that youth learn to raise awareness of oppressive conditions within their community and problematize those conditions within society. The counter-narratives that immigrant youth develop refute "othered" identities by moving the focus away from the white dominant voice. This reclaiming of space can lead to both the transformation of 'self' and the audience. Furthermore, these counter-narratives have the power to lead to social action and change. The next section will review the previous literature regarding representations and media discourse; images of youth, racial/ethnic minorities and immigrants; implications for minoritized youth and immigrant youth; and finally, critical education and youth activism.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Representations and Media Discourse

After recently watching the newly released and critically acclaimed film, “Gran Torino,” I was reminded that the representation of certain groups has not changed. We are indoctrinated everyday with images, words and symbols that hold certain meanings for each of us. When we open a magazine or newspaper, turn on the television, watch a film, or look at art in public spaces, we see images that reinforce our understanding of our social world. The representations that are used by mass media can have a profound impact on our perceptions of reality and the way in which we engage with the world. Mitchell states that, “representation is an extremely elastic notion which extends all the way from a stone representing a man to a novel representing a day in the life of several Dubliners” (1995, p.13). Representations can be easily manipulated and transformed by those constructing different images in popular culture. Therefore, one must critique how representations, especially those of race, gender, class, sexual orientation and ableism, are formulated and used to undermine the self-identities of people of colour.

The practice of constructing images of non-white people in order to assert control over them and affirm white European superiority began long before the founding of North America by white European settlers. Said explores the idea of “Orientalism” in which the peoples, culture and ideas associated with the Orient are informed by Western scholars, writers and artists. Said argued that over time ideas of “the Orient” became a prejudiced and stereotyped set of imagined beliefs regarding the people and cultures of non-European origin. The essentialist ideas regarding the Orient included its aberrant mentality, backwardness and tendency to despotism (Said, 2007). The dominant representations of “the Orient” were built not on reality or accurate depictions, but rather reflected the West’s biased ‘self’ creation. The representations demarcated a separation of Europe from Asiatic localities and upheld the West’s superior status. Orientalism

became a system of representations that constructed a truth regarding the superiority of the West that still goes unchallenged.

The West was able to detach itself from the rest of the world through discourse, “a series of statements or beliefs that produce knowledge in order to serve the interest of a particular group or class” (Hall, 2007, p. 56). When discussing society, politics or morality, Foucault contests that statements are seldom ever true or false because “facts” are deciphered in numerous ways (ibid). The language that is utilized to discuss “facts” can impede how one decides the accuracy or inaccuracy of such statements. Therefore, power becomes an important factor in how “facts” are perceived. Foucault wrote, “We should admit that power produces knowledge...That power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute...power relations” (1980, p. 27).

Stuart Hall used the term “discourse” to mean “a particular way of representing ‘the West,’ ‘the Rest’ and the relations between them (2007). The discourse of “the West” and “the Rest” was brokered by Europeans who had specific interests and motives that influenced the way the New World was described and represented. This discourse was used to produce knowledge that shaped how the West perceived itself and “others,” its understanding of “us” and “them,” and the practices and relations of power concerning “the Rest” (Hall, 2007). Foucault notes that power functions through discourse and therefore impacts both those who perpetrate it and those who are subjected to it (ibid). The implications that the discourse of “the West and the Rest” have in contemporary times remain cogent. Hall, borrowing from Foucault, contends that the discourse which supports the superiority of the white patriarch continues to impact on the representations and identities of the racial minority so that subjected groups see themselves as the Other (1990). Dominant groups use representations to construct the “self” as well as the “other”

(Said, 2007). The normalization of discourse maintaining the status quo in North America keeps certain racial groups in a perpetual state of subjugation.

The media is looked to as an important source of information by which individuals gain knowledge about their world, their nation and their city. Therefore, the attitudes and beliefs of people within a nation are shaped by those who control what is made public knowledge and how that knowledge is conveyed (Mahtani, 2001). The way in which a country such as Canada is interpreted by its citizenry is directly dependent on the media because they rely on it to keep them informed about their country. Jiwani states, "Minority groups are regularly excluded and marginalized, and the dominant culture is reinforced as the norm. [The dominant culture] constitute[s] a monopoly of knowledge, and through their practices of selection, editing and production, they determine the kinds of news we receive about our nation" (1995, para. 4). The media has the power to choose which images of minorities dominate the public domain such as the inner-city gang member or the Muslim terrorist and how they will shape public opinion. From their research findings, review of the literature, and their own experiences in media, Henry and Tator suggest that there is no reflection or introspection within the corporate culture of media organization (2002). Their analysis of the Canadian English-language press indicated that the voice and text of journalists and editors "resonate with arrogance, ethnocentrism, and often unrestrained resentment toward minorities" (ibid, p. 234).

The maintenance of power over media outlets has been dominated by wealthy white males. The media, including film, television, magazines and newspapers, become a significant vehicle by which images are relayed to the public, giving certain privileged groups the ability to manipulate large audiences. Vera and Gordon look at the idea of the white messiah: "white men, alienated heroes who are often misfits within their own society and are even mocked and rejected until they become leaders of a rejected group" (2003, p. 115). The white messiah has

been a ubiquitous character in Hollywood film, from *Birth of a Nation* to contemporary films such as *Superman*, *Rambo*, *Rocky*, *Spiderman* and *Gran Torino*. Rather than oppressors of people of other races, white messiahs are depicted as saviours and leaders of these groups. The “ideal white self” is portrayed positively: “powerful, handsome, brave, cordial, kind, firm and generous: a natural-born leader” (Vera & Gordon, 2003, p. 116). On the other hand, minoritized characters are seen as needing help and are usually docile and grateful (ibid). Their representations are less important in order to illuminate the self-absorbed and grandiose “white messiah” creations of white filmmakers.

Furthermore, the absence of historical accounts or the erasure of history of minority groups allows for the continual domination of white supremacist ideals. For example, hooks discusses how the kinship and solidarity between Native Americans, Africans and African Americans prior to the arrival of Columbus to the New World has been historically erased by white supremacy through the suppression of documents and other information detailing their strong relationship (1992). Churchill notes that due to the superiority complex of the colonizing power, interpretations of indigenous cultures have been co-opted by their conquerors and therefore indigenous cultures themselves are dominated by these interpretations (1992). The result is the inability for Native and African Americans to reclaim agency in order to document and interpret their reality, particularly their mutual bond (hooks, 1992).

hooks asserts that “there is a direct and abiding connection between the maintenance of white supremacist patriarchy in this society and the institutionalization via mass media of specific images, representations of race, of blackness that support and maintain the oppression, exploitation, and overall domination of all black people” (1992, p. 2). This statement can be applied to all minoritized individuals living in North American society, for example the disabled and women. For minoritized and immigrant youth living in North America the consequences for

negative media depictions as well as a lack of representation can be harmful to the interpretations of their day-to-day experiences, negotiations with their identity, self-perceptions and self-esteem. Media representations can have real consequences that impede one's access to social, political and economic structures such as education or employment.

### **Images of Youth, Racial/Ethnic Minorities & Immigrants**

The term "youth" has become a pejorative identity that is often associated with violence and reckless behaviour. Youth are often positioned within society and the State as a group to be feared; they are individuals who are out of control and are in need of regulation (Pain, 2003). The literature on youth crime has historically maintained the belief that primarily youth commit delinquent and violent behaviour. There is an increased perception in society that children and youth are participating more readily in aggressive and anti-social behaviour. Youth crime depicted in Canadian media has recently been portrayed as growing in frequency, impacting larger numbers of people, increasing in severity and being perpetrated by younger offenders (Faucher, 2009). Utilizing discourse to instil alarm and fear in the general public by framing youth as dangerous and violent legitimizes the ability of the State and other adult authority figures to control young people. A longitudinal analysis of youth crime in Canadian media by Faucher found that youth were increasingly held responsible and accountable for their behaviour (2009). Faucher also notes that youth committing crimes went from being portrayed as naughty in the 1950's to being increasingly deliberate and brash, and within the last twenty years consistently construed as "evil, cruel, vicious, brutal, dangerous and menacing" (ibid, p. 448). Media depictions of young offenders have transitioned from a forgiving attitude to a much less sympathetic one.

The discourse that places growing accountability on youth for their criminal behaviour has also come at a time when neoliberal policies have made citizens increasingly responsible for their

own welfare. The neoliberal shifts in policy and legislation have had a significant impact on young people of colour in North America. In the United States, the Reagan administration (1980-1989) brought in a new era of reduced educational funding and social services for youth with increased policing and “cracking down on youth crime” (Hosang, 2006). Mass media and political discourse worked in collusion to profile and construct young minorities as a threat to the national dream of peace and prosperity by racializing youth crime and teen pregnancy (ibid). After President Clinton’s 1994 crime bill, which allowed juveniles to be tried as adults, forty one states produced their own versions of the policy (Hosang, 2006). These policies have provided another outlet for government to continue to place blame on racialized youth, in particular for the rise in crime, and to provoke public outrage.

Despite the government’s criminalization and increased monitoring of youth, there were 60,000 fewer young people arrested for homicide, rape, robbery and assault in 2001 than in 1994 (Males, 1996). Also, a 2001 FBI report found that the rate of the nation’s homicides and violent crimes committed by young people are the lowest in history (ibid). This shows that the increased scrutiny of youth was unnecessary, yet it legitimized the construction of prisons for poor youth of colour, and billions of dollars were spent creating the prison industry. Interestingly, this same mindset also increased the redundancy of building schools for this group, since it was seen as a waste of money to invest in such “criminals” (Hosang, 2006). The “zero tolerance” policies instituted in schools have undermined the everyday social practices between students, teachers and administrators (Giroux, 2001; Noguera, 1995 in Robbins, 2005). This leads to the practice of “weeding out troublemakers” and public punishment of students in order to engender an atmosphere of fear, which causes youth to feel alienated and distrustful of authority figures (Robbins, 2008, p.8). Therefore, youth of color are placed in a position in which they are criminalized by the state and not supported by the education system, which keeps them in a

position of subjugation. Many of them are unable to escape their situation through educational opportunities or receive assistance from the state.

The way in which crime is racialized in media is through a deliberate process of ‘othering’ with persistent images and terms employed to distance the reader or viewer from the audience. This ‘othering’ has been used to demarcate racial distinctions of perpetrators as well as designating specific vocabulary such as ‘thief’ or ‘murderer’ in order to dehumanize and obscure the identity of the individual stripping them of other identifiers such as those of son or daughter and student or colleague (Faucher, 2009; Becker, 1963). In Faucher’s study, the use of racial indicators, especially those referring to ‘visible minorities’, was almost entirely used when the offence discussed was extremely violent in nature (2009). On the other hand, white young offenders were rarely identified racially unless the incident involved confrontation with ‘visible minority’ groups; in addition, the racial or ethnic motivation for the confrontation was dismissed if the perpetrators were white (ibid). Other research shows that ‘race’ is much more often specified when the perpetrator is not white (Dubinsky & Givertz, 1999; Henry & Tator, 2002; van Dijk, 1991). In addition, motivation for crimes is ascribed differently in the news depending on the race of the offender (Wortley, 2002; Dubinsky & Givertz, 1999).

Another way in which people of colour are established as a non-entity within North American society is their absence from print and electronic media. The Canadian government attempts to sell “diversity” as a political and economic strategy to bolster the Canadian image, yet there is still an absence of ethnic minorities in Canadian media (Henry & Tator, 2002; Fleras & Kunz 2001; Mahtani, 2001). In addition to the lack of representation in media, there is also a sufficient shortage of minorities hired by media organizations. For example, according to a study by Mayers (1986) of forty-one English-language newspaper agencies in Ontario, less than two percent of the employees were either people of colour, people with a disability, or Aboriginal (in

Henry & Tator, 2002). The near invisibility of minoritized people in media organizations allows the standards of whiteness to be perpetuated in the newsrooms, because no one is there to bring in new insights or speak up for change. Therefore, the message that whiteness is superior and important remains a powerful influence on audiences.

Films such as *Dangerous Minds* perpetuate the 'rightness of Whiteness' by representing whiteness as an "archetype for rationality, authority and cultural standards" (Giroux, 1996, p.46). The film accomplishes this by depicting 'at-risk' black and Hispanic youth living in the urban ghettos as delinquents in need of discipline and control. The inner city communities are "a site of pathology, moral decay, and delinquency synonymous with the culture of black life defined by unemployment and poverty – an image conservatives are apt to conjure when referring to the 'welfare state'" (Giroux, 1996, p.47). These stereotypes, also displayed in films such as *Blackboard Jungle*, *The Principal*, *187* and *The Substitute* are constructed by the social, political and media discourse and are widely circulated to impact our impressions of these communities.

Trier conducted a project to challenge the assumptions, knowledge and beliefs that white pre-service teachers had of inner city schools prior to their placements there. Trier found that most students had a negative perception of inner-city schools and wrote that the schools "would be 'run down' and in a 'slum'; teachers would be 'frustrated' and 'burnt out'; the parents wouldn't care about their children's education, nor would they be able to control their kids; and the students would be out of control, 'aggressive', into drugs, in trouble with the law, and so on" (Trier, 2005, p. 175). Almost all of the student teachers implicated the media, including films, television programs and television news as a source by which many of these impressions were formed.

While portrayals of inner-city communities and the minority youth that inhabit them are made to look criminal and dangerous, white middle-class values are seen as redeeming and a form of

salvation. In *Dangerous Minds*, the heroine is a white middle-class female educator, LouAnne Johnson, who is depicted as innocent and compassionate. She is determined to bring order and guidance to the inner city students by asserting her authority with threats as well as motivating them with bribes such as candy bars and fieldtrips. The lives of the students are “decontextualized and dehistoricized” because they are not mentioned in the movie; instead, LouAnne is centered as the “beacon of light” who convinces the students that “who they are and what they know needs to be ditched if they are to become more civilized and cultured (more white, as it were)” (Giroux, 1996, p. 47). It is assumed that the only hope for these poor, inner-city youth is to embrace white-middle class values, disregarding the reality that many of them “lack the power and resources to negotiate their lives politically, geographically, or economically” (ibid).

### **Implications for Minoritized Youth and Immigrant Youth**

The construction of identity for minority youth is multifaceted and involves a number of negotiations. For black youth, as well as other minoritized youth, identity is a result of resistance and struggle because they must continuously fight racist stereotypes as well as confront racist public policies. For example, according to Haymes whites believe that black youth and their schools are unmanageable and dangerous (1995). These are common notions that are upheld by popular culture with films such as *Dangerous Minds* and *The Substitute* in which urban schools and communities are viewed as “war zones” that need to be civilized by a white saviour (Ginwright, 2004).

Due to the post 1960’s security fear of increasing numbers of African Americans and immigrant populations settling in the inner cities, white America fled to the suburbs and produced a great divide between the two locales. The ‘void’ that was created became a barrier between whites living in the suburbs and poor whites, blacks and other people of colour living in

the inner-city (McCarthy, 1998). The modern day ghetto has become socially isolated with a lack of employment opportunities as well as a lack of interaction between residents and those outside the ghetto (Wilson, 1987 in Freeman, 2006). Neoliberal policies and programs of the 1990s have further marginalized inner city ghettos and have created substandard schools, dilapidated homes, isolated social spaces and underfunded institutions (Wilson, 2006). Furthermore, the 'void' was filled by images and cultural texts created by film and television claiming "the most poignantly sordid fantasies of inner-city degeneracy and moral decrepitude" (McCarthy, 1998, p.181). They legitimized white flight and allowed many whites to feel relatively safe in the suburbs, as long as they kept people of colour in the inner-cities where they presumably 'belonged' (ibid, p.181). . The fear that is generated by images of gun-wielding youth of colour can cause panic which results in the building of prisons rather than strengthening the education system or instituting a strong social service sector accessible to inner city youth.

In addition to the discourse on youth, the way in which immigration and immigrants have been framed within the media and political discourse has hindered the development of immigrant youth. The "immigrant" in Western society has always been scrutinized and looked upon with suspicion due to their "foreignness" and "strange accents." Throughout history, immigration has been constructed as "plague or infestation," and immigrants as "disease or invaders" with popular films about "alien invasions" in which the United States is always in danger of being taken over (Chang, 2000, p.2). These themes feed into the idea that the United States is a rich, civilized nation with plentiful resources and it must be protected from Third World immigrants (ibid). The image of a welfare dependent Mexican immigrant with five children "invading" the United States causes alarm with the public and leads to policies such as Proposition 187 that further disenfranchise certain groups by criminalizing their presence in North America.

Another popular image that has led to heightened security for many Western countries and stricter immigration policies is the Muslim population and the danger they pose to national security and the “democratic values” of the West. In Canada, a ten year study of press images of Arabs from 1972 to 1982 showed Arabs as consistently being portrayed as irrational, backward, bloodthirsty, amoral and ignorant (Gova & Kurd, 2008). These images have not abated. In an investigation by Awan et al., Maclean’s Magazine was found to demonstrate anti-Muslim sentiment with publication of articles such as “The Future belongs to Islam,” “The Little Mosque that Couldn’t,” and “The Making of a Canadian Terrorist.” (Awan, Skeikh, Mithoowani, Ahmed & Simard, 2007). These articles present Muslims as violent, potential terrorists, and as a threat to the “Western” values of democracy, freedom and human rights (Awan et al., 2007). The misrepresentation of Muslims by media undermines their sense of belonging within the host society, and forces them to continually rebuild their identities as Muslims and validate their contributions and positive participation in Canadian society (Gova & Kurd, 2008). For youth of colour, particularly immigrants, there is a challenge to constantly battle stereotypes and prejudice because they are given little power within their social world to overcome these barriers.

Minority youth must struggle to find meaning and freedom in the context of both racist ideologies promoted by pop culture and racist public policies. For many youth of colour, their resistance is obstructed by stronger forces such as institutionalized racism. In the U.S., resistance to unfair immigration policies affecting the Latino community was constructed in a specific way through media coverage of the 2006 protests. Across the nation there were massive school walkouts, and Latino youth were portrayed in the media as hordes of “uninformed” and “unconscious” students taking the opportunity to skip school (Velez et al., 2008). The media framed the walkouts as improper, purposeless, and even dangerous. A media analysis study conducted by Velez et al. found that suggestions of Latino youths’ “truancy” and “deviance” for

their decision to walk out of school alluded to the danger they posed to U.S. society (2008). Their actions were portrayed as disrespectful and insulting, even though the protests were mostly peaceful and non-violent. In this way, the media has the power to shape public responses to demonstrations in a very negative manner. Furthermore, the government and its policies were not given the same amount of scrutiny as the students were, reinforcing the precedent that the U.S. government has ultimate authority and legitimacy and should not be questioned.

Media discourse has a significant impact on the social and psychological development of youth. "As mediators of experience, discourses establish the terrain on which people understand their identities, experiences, and interests, constituting the "common sense" they draw upon in their negotiations and calculations of day-to-day life" (Hosang, 2006, p. 4). Negative depictions of minority youth and the lack of nuanced representations can serve to lower self-esteem or contribute to self-hatred. With messages that portray Canadian minorities, especially Black or South Asian Canadians, as criminals or deviants, they may feel as if they do not belong. However, they can have an even deeper impact, as Becker states in regards to labelling people with a deviant master status: "Treating a person as though he were generally rather than specifically deviant produces a self-fulfilling prophecy. It sets in motion several mechanisms which conspire to shape the person in the image people have of him" (1963, p. 34). In addition, there are few messages and images reproduced in the mass media that portray minority youth with positive attributes or as role models.

The incorporation of whiteness in mass media as the superior and desired ideology leaves no room for the acceptance and celebration of other cultural identities. hooks writes that, "Despite the civil rights struggle, the 1960's black power movement, and the power of slogans like "black is beautiful," masses of black people [and other minority groups] continue to be socialized via mass media and non-progressive educational systems to internalize white supremacist thoughts

and values” (1992, p.18). Messages that assert the worthlessness of minority groups feed into an internalized racism or rejection of black identity or any other identity that does not embrace whiteness. This rejection is also fed by the post 1960s idea that material success is more important than personal integrity and undermines the struggle for self-determination that emphasized decolonization and loving blackness (hooks, 1992). Without the struggle for self-determination and affirmation of one’s non-white, non-status quo identities, then whiteness will continue to impact on the self esteem of individuals who do not fit the white, able-bodied, middle-class, hetero-normative standards that we are measured by.

### **Critical Education and Youth Activism**

When youth are made to feel inferior or not given a chance to succeed, there is the danger of disengagement or disaffection from schooling. Traditional academic instruction can alienate and exclude students belonging to culturally marginalized groups (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Fine argues that schools which disrespect the diversity of students cause many to be pushed out of schools (1991). In Canada, the rate of newcomer youth who drop out of high school is approximately 46% to 74% in some jurisdictions; in comparison to the general population at 12% to 25% (Bushnik, Barr-Telford & Bussiere, 2004; Duffy, 2005; King, 2004; Watt & Roessingh, 2001 in Dei, 2008). Besides larger social problems, such as poverty that result in students dropping out, there are also a number of problems with the school environment and staff. The absence of “mind and soul” or disaffection within an institution like a school occurs from the subtle messages that are sent to students in schools by the differential treatment they receive, or the misrecognition or non-recognition of a student’s racial identity (Dei, 2008). Students are not equipped with sufficient safeguards or antiracist support measures in the school to handle the pressures they are constantly subjected to for challenging such prejudices.

Multicultural education became a response within the school system to address the Eurocentric bias that was ubiquitous throughout schools in North America. A product of the Civil Rights Movement, multicultural education in the United States sought to create better educational opportunities for minority students by addressing their cultural histories, experiences and learning styles (Ginwright, 2004). In Canada, multicultural education was formalized with the passing of the Multiculturalism Act of 1988 by Trudeau (Boone & Chan, 2005). The emphasis on ethnic and cultural differences in curricula and the celebration of cultural diversity in the school from a white, middle class perspective perpetuates assimilationist ideologies and distracts from issues such as ethnic conflict or institutional racism. School districts, teachers and policy makers continue to side step the main issues that impact young students' lives including poverty, homelessness, non-status, discrimination in the social service sector, and so forth. Critics claim that multicultural education has become a form of social control rather than social change because the focus has been placed on "empathy, appreciation and understanding" of various cultures rather than critique of the socio-political reality that many youth of colour face (Olneck, 1990 in Rezai-Rashti, 1995, p. 166). Also, many newcomers and marginalized youth suffer alienation from attempting to assimilate with a socially devalued identity (Dei, 2008). By focussing on the student's culture, policies and programs fail to challenge the oppressive conditions that many minority students face and overlook the complex identity issues of urban youth (ibid).

Embracing multiculturalism has become an important part of the Canadian discourse, especially in schools. However, there needs to be a distinction made between the different types of multicultural curricula that are being promoted in the classroom. In her article, *Critical Multiculturalism and Second Language Education*, Kubota compares "liberal multiculturalism" and "critical multiculturalism." She describes "liberal multiculturalism" as a "token social

protocol that everyone must endorse” (Kubota, 2004, p.32). In this way, teachers do not engage in issues of social and economic inequities, nor do they address the institutional racism that exists in school and society (Kubota, 2004). Therefore, the power and privilege of the white dominant culture is not recognized. Instead, a superficial understanding of diversity is endorsed through a “decontextualized and trivialized” concept of artifacts, festivals and customs that are “divorced from everyday life and people and political struggle to define cultural identity” (Kubota, 2004, p. 35). On the other hand, “critical multiculturalism” aims for social transformation of not only ethnic minority students, but for all students. Kubota notes that viewing racism and other types of injustice must be seen as a collective oppression rather than an individual one (2004). Critical multiculturalism dissects power structures and challenges students to explore the inequalities that exist. It also allows students to contribute their own experiences and think of ways to problem-solve regarding the systematic racism that is a reality not only in the school, but in society as well.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire discusses the importance of first recognizing oppression before action can be taken to stop it (1970). The messages that we receive everyday through social institutions, such as the media or corporations, can lead to “alienation, obesity, depression, low self-esteem, academic failure, and a dependency on consumer goods” (Morrell, 2008, p. 5). Therefore, any citizen who aspires to live a self-determined life must begin to confront and counter the ideologies hidden in language and texts. In *Removing the Margins*, the chapter entitled “Language Integration” discusses how language is “a dynamic system that functions both as an effect of, and medium for, social forces” (Dei, James, Karumanchery, James-Wilson & Zine, 2000, p.98). Language also “stands as one of the strongest support structure[s] of ethnic identity” (Dei et. al., 2000, p.107). Through language (among other things), the “other” is created and minoritized (Dei et. al., 2000, p.100). This “othering” leads to disengagement from

school: "A positive self-concept is crucial for minoritized students if they are to find a sense of place in the mainstream" (Dei et. al., 2000, p.105).

Teaching from an anti-racist perspective, encouraging critical engagement with lessons, and using popular culture as curricular material are ways to make schooling more meaningful and relevant. Freire discusses "conscientization", a type of consciousness-raising by which individuals learn to problematize that which is taken for granted. Critical literacy is a way in which students can learn to analyze and deconstruct the various meanings that a text may have, including those from television, advertisements, film, music, web pages, art, etc. Students need to understand the function of language and texts in "the construction of the self and the social" in order to "define [themselves] on their own terms" (Morrell, 2008, p.5). Mahiri found that critical teaching of popular culture is a way to relate issues concerning all students in diverse classrooms (1998). Critical literacy aims to decode the socially constructed meaning embedded in texts and lead to "an emancipated worldview and even transformational social action" (Freire, 1970; Hull, 1993; McLaren, 1989; UNESCO, 1975 in Morrell, 2002).

Historically youth have been socialized to remain silent: not to "talk back" to authority, to have little or no authority over their words and to be dominated by adults (Fine, 1991; hooks, 1989; Giroux, 2000). When youth have space to construct counter-narratives that refute the common stereotypes of mainstream media, there is a greater possibility of change. Youth can participate in the deconstruction of dominant narratives and challenge oppressive practices in order to fight for a more egalitarian and inclusive society (Morrell, 2002). Although particular portrayals of immigrant youth in mainstream media and literature are prolific in popular culture, there are spaces in which immigrant and immigrant youth can speak for themselves.

Richard Delgado utilized counterstorytelling as a technique for telling the story of untold experiences (1989). It can also be a tool to critically analyse and challenge the stories of those in power (ibid). Counterstorytelling can offer the following:

(a) [It] can build community among those at the margins of society by putting a human and familiar face to educational theory and practice; (b) [it] can challenge the perceived wisdom of those at society's center; (c) [it] can open new windows into the reality of those at the margins of society by showing the possibilities beyond the ones they live and to show that they are not alone in their position; (d) [it] can teach others that by combining elements from both the story and the current reality, one can construct another world that is richer than either the story or the reality alone; and (e) [it] can provide a context to understand and transform established belief systems (Delgado, 1989; Lawson, 1995).

The use of counterstorytelling is utilized by marginalized groups such as immigrant youth. Through music, poetry, literature and film, youth are able to make a space for counterhegemonic cultural practices (Ardizzone, 2007).

Poetry can serve as a powerful medium to talk about personal experiences without the impediment of structure and rules. Greene proposes that modes of expression such as poetry need to exist as part of our "lived worlds" and be shared with one another (2000). Regarding the palpability of these forms of expression, Green writes, "It would mean the granting of audibility to numerous voices seldom heard before and, at once, an involvement with all sorts of young people being provoked to make their own the multilinguality needed for restructuring of contemporary experience and thematizing lived worlds" (Greene, 1988, p. 127). Unfortunately, most poetry and literature taught in many urban classrooms have focussed on the "classics", representing privileged white male voices rather than poets and writers of colour (Reed, 2003). Therefore, work done to "democratize" poetry such as Poetry for the People (P4P) established by June Jordan in order to maintain artistic and political empowerment for youth is very important and necessary (Jocson, 2005). The P4P program utilizes poetry to shape the "socio-political

consciousness and actions” of historically marginalized groups such as the poor, the homeless, youth and people of colour (ibid). Jocson found with an examination of P4P’s reader and curriculum that a “safe space” was established in order for youth’s voices to be recognized as valuable and indispensable to the interests of adolescents (2005). The poetry by P4P’s youth members speak to the experiences and understanding of adolescents. By exposing their lived experiences through poetry, youth provide relevant and powerful narratives that have the power to transform the speaker as well as other youth, particularly immigrant and youth of colour.

Media literacy and production is another form in which young people are given agency to address the conditions of social inequality. In an examination of video-documentation, field notes, and student work products of a summer seminar, Duncan-Andrade found urban youth engaging in transformative social action with the use of media (2006). The six week seminar included research by black and Latino eleventh graders in Los Angeles regarding civic participation in their communities. Duncan-Andrade found that the students’ video drew heavily from other young people and community activists, capturing their political and social understanding and engaged an oftentimes unheard voice detailing the needs of urban communities (2006). Through video, youth are able to make important contributions to the discussion of social justice and the conditions that impact their lives. Peer-produced documentary and video can act as a vehicle for young people to understand the potential for their own and other’s agency and connection with the world. They empower youth to use and listen to each other’s voices and learn from one another (Poyntz, 2006).

The creation of literature by youth can be seen as an empowering and transformative process that allows them to think deeply about issues that pertain to their lives and question their place and the roles they have been given by society. Through literature creation, youth discover the processes in society that create inequalities and marginalization. This understanding has the

possibility of leading to a place of power and understanding due to the knowledge gained. The critique and analysis of society that is expressed by racialized immigrant youth within literature offers a powerful medium by which they are able to fight back and resist the dominant culture. In the next section, an analysis of two mainstream films, *Gran Torino* and *Entre les Murs*, will be presented, followed by an analysis of immigrant youth produced works.

## **METHODS AND METHODOLOGY**

### **The Power of Discourse**

The role of media as a system and process of mass communication carries out numerous functions including “information processing and reproduction, education, socialization, entertainment, employment and advertising” (Henry, 1999, p. 1). Mass media serves as an important conduit by which information and knowledge are transferred from an “authority” to a wide audience. Television, movies, newspapers and magazines, among other media sources, provide information on social life that does not necessarily reflect social reality (Neuman, 2006). The messages that are received by the wider society lead to the development of various identities including gender, ethnicity, class, race and nationality. This study will be particularly concerned with the representation of minorities in media. The depiction of minorities in Western media plays a significant role in influencing the social identities of those individuals (Henry, 1999). Media images of minorities are not arbitrarily produced, but rather is a complex system that regularly excludes and marginalizes minority groups and reinforces the dominant culture as the norm (Mahtani, 2001). Media impacts the way in which we interact with the world around us and has a profound effect on the day-to-day choices we make.

Media is a powerful tool that has an ever-expanding audience. Since the creation of the first transatlantic two way radio, media has revolutionized and allowed for long distance communication. The increasing access to media outlets such as radio, film, the internet, newspapers and magazines has led to wide distribution of information, opinions, advertisement, entertainment and art. In addition, globalization has integrated our world and has necessitated the transnational dissemination of ideas. As a result, diverse creators of media have sprung up over time, and currently the viewpoints expressed within media are vast. Anyone with access to a computer can disperse various messages to people throughout the world. However, media in its

various forms often represents the ideas of a few powerful individuals. As Jiwani (1995) has stated, “the media are among the richest organizations in society. They constitute a monopoly of knowledge, and through their practices of selection, editing and production, they determine the kinds of news we receive about our nation.” These powerful organizations propagate a specific message to their audiences that not only sustain their superior position in society, but also work to discredit and taint the reputation of marginalized groups.

Fiske (1994) asserts that words are never neutral. They harbour underlying meanings that are politicized because they transmit the interests and agenda of those in power (McGregor, 2003). Those in power are dominant groups with access to specific forms of discourse such as media that can be used as a resource to assert control over the minds and actions of others (van Dijk, 2003). Beliefs, knowledge and opinions are commonly accepted through discourse from authoritative, trustworthy, or credible sources, such as scholars or experts (Nesler, Aguinis, Quigley & Tedeschi, 1993). Therefore, the way an event is interpreted or a group of people are framed by the media can influence the way the public responds to such events or people. The words of those in power are presumed to be “self-evident truths” while the words of the powerless are considered irrelevant, insubstantial or inappropriate (van Dijk, 2003). Words are used in discourse to assert power and influence over public perceptions. Fiske defines discourse as “language in social use; language accented with a history of domination, subordination, and resistance; language marked by the social conditions of its use and its users: it is politicized, power-bearing language employed to extend or defend the interests of its discursive community” (1994, p. 3). Discourse is shaped by various authorities in society who set the boundaries on what issues are discussed and how they are considered (Henry & Tator, 2002). In general, the way information is disseminated by dominant discourse and the language and visual imagery that are utilized reinforce the status quo and manipulate public opinion (Karim, 1993). The powerful

elite who produce such discourses are able to maintain their authority by persistently co-opting and manipulating the words, images and symbols that refute their interests, often those of the marginalized (ibid).

### **Research Design and Methods**

Media has become so pervasive that one can feel inundated by mainstream messages, which narrows our choices as individuals. There are few mass media outlets that express ideas that diverge too far from the mainstream. Therefore, analyzing the messages that are embedded in critically acclaimed films such as *Gran Torino* and *Entre les Murs* is essential to exposing the inherent inequalities that exist. Those who can deconstruct mainstream media can also deconstruct the sexist or racist ideas inherent in popular culture. Critically analyzing media is also one way in which individuals can easily and practically question the society in which they live. This study will be analyzing two mainstream feature films, *Gran Torino* and *Entre les Murs*, and utilizing critical discourse analysis to understand the way in which immigrant youth of colour are portrayed and the significance these portrayals have on their position within society.

The given power of the written and spoken word requires a system of analysis that describes, interprets, analyzes, and critiques social life reproduced in text and talk (Luke, 1997). Therefore, critical discourse analysis (CDA) of language and text is utilized to deconstruct the ideologies of mass media and other influential sources of power. Critical discourse analysis primarily addresses social problems and political issues that pertain to discursive power relations (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). It considers the social, economic, political and historical contexts within which text and talk operate. The use of CDA will be applied to the secondary sources in order to understand the way in which “social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” (van Dijk,

2003, p. 352). It attempts to illuminate the process by which dominant forces in a society construct adaptations of reality that serve their interests (McGregor, 2003).

Henry and Tator's study on the immigration discourse found that racist ideologies served to exclude and make certain out-groups inferior by identifying and describing them as "threatening" (2002). This leads to the rationalization and excusing of bias and discrimination towards these groups. At the same time, the in-group claims qualities and attributes that the out-group does not possess in order to maintain its superior status (Henry & Tator, 2002). Therefore, CDA analysis will be used to uncover how racist ideologies are utilized in mainstream films to develop a discourse that excludes as well as vilifies minority youth and young immigrants in particular.

The objective in utilizing CDA is to recognize and expose social inequality within text and talk and assert a position of resistance towards discrimination and racism that impacts the wider society. For many critical discourse analysts, the purpose is to create "counter or oppositional discourses that provide alternative ways of interpreting, understanding, and interacting with the world" (Henry & Tator, 2002, p. 73). An additional purpose is to empower those oppressed by such discourses and promote the resistance and transformation of their lives. Through both critical analysis and critical literacy, I hope to illuminate the text and talk of immigrants, particularly youth, that challenge and refute the discursive power regimes that impact on their lives.

Furthermore, examining work composed or created by individuals who do not come from the mainstream can offer powerful counter narratives that give voice to underrepresented or minoritized communities. They allow individuals from these groups to incorporate a diverse set of ideas and opinions into their repertoire that may defy or oppose generalizations and assumptions made by mainstream sources. They offer the audience an alternative way of thinking and responding to stereotypes or racism within mass media. The creation of media and literature is an empowering way by which minoritized groups can reclaim their subordinated

positions and speak back to dominant groups. This study will be examining written work and a couple of short films primarily by immigrant youth utilizing a critical literacy approach.

Traditional academic instruction typically embraces dominant literacy practices. These practices are “those associated with formal organisations, such as those of education, law, religion and the workplace, and are given high value, legally and culturally” (Barton & Hamilton, 1998: p. 251-252). Although having dominant literacy skills can result in positive social and economic outcomes (UNESCO, 2005), they can be exclusionary and alienate members of culturally marginalized groups (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 1992). The insufficient focus on these groups can diminish motivation and achievement and lead to resistance, apathy or dropping out (Morrell, 2008). The dominant discourse for literacy instruction focuses on the acquisition of reading and writing skills and isolates literacy into a “neutral entity” (ibid, pp. 4). However, literacy is dynamic and tied to power relations in society (Freire & Macedo, 1987) and students would be better served if they were given the opportunity to understand and navigate discourses of power.

Social scientists and theorists contend that we are socially constructed, are defined and define ourselves through our interactions with “ideologically laden language and text” (Morrell, 2008, p. 5). Given the power of social institutions to produce knowledge and information that influences the construction of us and our actions, it is vital that counter language and text are produced. Through critical literacy, a foundation of understanding is necessary and intervention is crucial to overcoming the potentially dangerous messages that are embedded in language and text. Freire saw literacy as a means to reclaim ‘voice’ and agency for the ‘oppressed’ (Luke, 1998). This study will be examining text and talk that have been created primarily by immigrant youth who critique and analyze issues of social inequality.

An important consideration for researchers is the bias that they bring into any study. Critical discourse analysts must be cognizant of their and other scholar's roles within society. They argue that scholarly discourse should be recognized as a part of and influenced by social structure and acknowledged as a product of social interactions (van Dijk, 2003). As a researcher utilizing critical discourse analysis, I must consider my position as a person of colour and deliberate on how my background and past experiences have an influence on the way in which I understand and analyze the material that I am presented with. As a fourth generation Japanese American female growing up in the United States, I felt that I had to constantly battle stereotypes and generalizations that were forced upon me. I have to consider how different social processes, practices and policies have shaped how I perceive myself and others. With this understanding, I will be examining two films that I believe present immigrant youth in a negative manner and continue to perpetuate stereotypes and perceptions about them. In addition, I will be presenting a number of immigrant youth produced media and literary works that I have personally selected in order to elucidate my argument that they offer powerful narratives that critique and analyze issues of social inequality.

I chose to focus on immigrant youth because I believe their circumstances to be unique in the sense that they must find a balance between their native culture and the majority culture. They often meet barriers in negotiating their identities due to conflicts between family and friends, and social institutions such as school or work (Boutakidis, Guerra & Soriano, 2006). In addition, immigrant youth must struggle with the way in which both the immigrant and youth discourses frame them. Due to these difficulties, I believe that it is more challenging for immigrant youth to reclaim their subordinated identities.

## Sampling Section

The feature length movies that will be examined for this study, *Gran Torino* and *Entre les Murs*, are based in the United States and France. *Gran Torino* was directed and produced by Clint Eastwood, who also stars in the film. *Gran Torino* was a critical success and has become Eastwood's most lucrative film, grossing over 263 million dollars. *Entre les Murs* was directed by Laurent Cantet and received the Palme d'Or at the 2008 Cannes Film Festival.

The media and literary selections that were chosen for analysis reflecting counter narratives of dominant discourse were limited to short films, writing, poetry and literature primarily by youth in Canada. The one sample of literature I will be examining, *Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow* (2004), was written by a nineteen year old author, Faiza Guene, whose parents were Algerian immigrants living in France. Nevertheless, the purpose is not to deconstruct mainstream media so much as to compare it to and show its weaknesses compared to immigrant produced media, which is central to the paper.

I will draw from works completed in two anthologies, compiled by The Colouring Book Project and The Asian Arts Freedom School. The Colouring Book described its project as a "Vancouver based youth-driven project where people of colour came together to build community, reflect, express, and explore issues of race and experiences that have shaped who we are through discussion, writing and other arts" (2006, p. II). The Asian Arts Freedom School describes itself as "an art-based radical Asian history and activism program for Asian/Pacific Islander youth in the Greater Toronto Area" (asianartsfreedomschool, 2009). Additionally, I will be analyzing a short story entitled, *I have a name!* by Karishma Kapil and a poem entitled, *Canadian Cancer* by Saira Najarali. Both pieces were part of *Cosmopolis, Toronto* (2007), an anthology of thirty two York University students writing about their educational experiences in their home country and as immigrants to Canada.

I will be utilizing a short film entitled *Slip of the Tongue* (2006), produced and directed by Karen Lum and based on a spoken word poem by Adriel Luis. The short was featured on Youth Reel, an online collection of youth produced film and won the 2007/2008 Reel Youth Film Festival People's Choice award for best overall film and best editing.

There are sampling limitations due to the difficulty of accessing specific information on the authors and producers of both media and literary works. Therefore, the samples do not necessarily come from immigrant youth, but reflect their diverse experiences and ideas. At the same time, I do not want to presume that all immigrant youth encounter the same experiences or have similar feelings and thoughts. I recognize the multiple backgrounds and beliefs that encompass this group. However, my focus is on the way in which media reproduces a particular discourse about minoritized youth, specifically immigrant youth, and the numerous ways marginalized groups respond to such discourse. In the next section, an analysis of two mainstream films, *Gran Torino* and *Entre les Murs*, will be presented.

## MAINSTREAM FILM ANALYSIS

This study will be analysing two films, *Gran Torino* (2008) and *Entre les Murs* (2008), in order to elucidate the ways in which youth of colour, particularly young immigrants, are portrayed in mainstream media. Both of the films I have analyzed were directed and written by white males, Clint Eastwood and Nick Schenk for *Gran Torino*, and Laurent Cantet and François Bégaudeau for *Entre les Murs*. However, both films feature immigrant youth, both first and second generation, as main characters. These are characters born in other countries that moved to France or the USA as children, or characters whose parents emigrated to France or the USA before bearing children. Understanding these films through a critical discourse analysis perspective will show how the white dominant discourse continues to perpetuate stereotypes of people of colour, immigrants and youth. As Hall states, the white patriarchy subjugates minority groups by creating a divisive relationship between “the West” and “the Rest” (Hall, 1990, 2007). These two films utilize this discourse to send messages that maintain the power of the dominant white group.

### **Gran Torino Analysis**

In *Gran Torino*, Walt Kowalski is a cantankerous, retired car manufacturer who has just buried his wife after a long marriage. He’s upset by the influx of immigrants in his neighbourhood, in particular the Hmong community springing up around him. After the young next door neighbour, Thao, fails when trying to steal Walt’s prized Gran Torino car, he is forced to put the boy to work doing various odd jobs around his house, at the behest of his ashamed neighbours. Thao, his sister Sue and Walt become friends, in particular after altercations with a local Hmong gang. Walt decides to take revenge on the gang for harming Thao, but the gang retaliates with a drive-by shooting and by raping Sue. Walt plots to ruin the gang by sacrificing his own life, sending the gang members to prison, and saving Thao and Sue from further gang harassment.

The first scene in which the viewer is introduced to the Hmong neighbours is after the reception for Walt's late wife's funeral. Members of the Hmong community are seen bringing food to the neighbour's house in celebration of the birth of a new baby. The neighbours are gathered in the backyard and Walt looks over and mumbles, "Damn barbarians," as they are beheading a chicken. This scene establishes Walt's hateful attitude towards his Hmong neighbours and is one of several throughout the film that exemplifies the "uncivilized" nature of the Hmong. Walt's attitude and comments separates the colonized and the colonizing, showing whites to be civilized, just people, while the Hmong are uncivilized and barbaric. This dichotomy plays out throughout the movie, as Walt is continually shown to be a civilizing force in the lives of his neighbours. As argued by Foucault, Walt holds power, and his voice provides us with the "facts" in the movie (1980, pg. 27). Through the perspective of Walt, the false binaries of good and bad are created in which Walt is the epitome of good and the Hmong are framed as the complete opposite.

Although the film tries to educate the viewer with references to traditional Hmong culture, there is no opportunity to fully understand the rights, rituals and behaviours that are present in the film. For example, one of the first scenes at the neighbour's house there is a ceremony being performed by a shaman, blessing the newborn child. The shaman waves a metal object back and forth while chanting and throws objects on the floor. Said describes Orientalism as a way in which "Oriental" people and culture are informed by the Western viewpoint (2007). Similarly, the film demonstrates that Hmong rituals and customs are continually expressed in terms of how Walt understands them. Although there may be authenticity in the ceremony, the viewer cannot understand the rights and rituals that are occurring and has no background knowledge of the blessing. Instead, the Hmong rituals and culture become "othered" and depicted as inferior or aberrant. This creates a divide between the audience and the characters and establishes a sense of

mystery and unknowing that is described as “backwardness” by Walt in a later scene at another Hmong gathering. When Walt is invited to a barbecue by Sue, he breaks a lot of cultural mores such as tapping a child on the head. For that reason, Sue gives him a mini lesson in Hmong etiquette [See Appendix A1]. Due to his misunderstanding, Walt retorts, “Well, sounds dumb, but fine,” and “God, you people are nuts. But the food does look good.” We are continually seeing the Hmong culture through the eyes of Walt, a bigoted and racist individual who has no interest in learning more about his neighbours. The racism that Walt’s character exudes seems to be necessary to drive the movie forward; however, Walt never learns to appreciate or respect other cultures or to reform from being a racist. The film, rather, focuses on how Walt needs to reform Thao by imbuing him with white American values. Another problem is the lack of critique of racism and how it impacts people.

In addition, Walt’s racism is tempered by Sue and Thao’s grandmother who has equal or even more intolerance and hatred towards Walt than he has for his Hmong neighbours. The grandmother’s racism is vehement and yet seems to come from nowhere. The lack of history the Hmong grandmother and the other Hmong characters in the film are given is comparable to the idea that hooks makes about the historical erasure of Native and African American relations (hooks, 1992). More specifically, hooks states that the suppression of information regarding their close relationship allowed white supremacists to keep the two groups separated, ensuring white domination (ibid). In the same way, Eastwood provides no explanation for the Hmong grandmother’s racism, and therefore she can be perceived as excessive and unreasonable. Walt’s racism, on the other hand, is explained as a result of his experience as a soldier in the Korean War and is therefore more legitimate.

Walt’s constant racial slurs are used throughout the film to emphasize his animosity towards people of Asian descent. There is little protest from the Hmong characters who either ignore his

insults or are shown to not understand them. This point emphasizes Vera and Gordon's claim that minority groups are often depicted as docile and loyal to their white counterparts (2003). Walt's slights become natural and endured, even accepted by the Hmong characters, and are a source of humour for the audience. As a viewer watching this movie with a predominantly white audience, I noticed that the racial slurs drew a lot of laughter from the crowd. In fact, almost all of the comedic moments in the film sprang from racist language or action. Walt's racism is normalized and is never questioned or fully addressed, but endures throughout the entire film. He uses racial slurs even up to the point in which he sacrifices his life for his Hmong neighbours. Walt's relationship with Thao and Sue is genuine, and I believe it is this relationship that compels him to sacrifice his life, rather than his respect for their ethnic heritage or other people of Asian descent.

Furthermore, the film continues to perpetuate the idea that immigrants bring poverty and dilapidation into the neighbourhood. Walt lives in a neighbourhood with predominantly Hmong residents whose houses are decaying and falling apart. However, Walt lives in a clean, well-maintained home with an immaculate yard. He personifies white middle class values and throughout the film, Walt makes comments about the state of ruin that the community is in. For example, in one scene Walt is sweeping his front yard and he comments about his previous neighbour, "Jesus. Polarski would roll over in his grave if he could see his lawn now. What the hell did Chinks have to move into this neighbourhood for?" The mainly Hmong residents are seen as poor and disrespectful, unwilling to take care of their homes and community. These depictions parallel those of inner city communities which, Giroux states, are often sites of dilapidation and moral decay that are associated with the behaviour of the residents (1996). In another scene, Walt tells Thao, "Because unlike you, I'm not useless and I maintain my own property. You swamp rats, on the other hand, you just can't help but..." There is no reference to

the social, economic, or political conditions that have placed many Hmong in the United States in poverty and at a social disadvantage [See Appendix A2]. The audience is informed of these neighbourhood conditions with images of “degeneracy and moral decrepitude” and as McCarthy (1998) argued, these become a tool to keep certain minority groups subjugated by legitimizing their social and economic position through a racist lens that does not consider the history and treatment of how they are excluded from economic opportunities.

Walt takes action by enlisting the help of Thao who is forced by his family to become Walt’s servant. Walt instructs Thao to fix the home and yard of the Hmong neighbour across the street so that he can enjoy the view. Afterwards, other Hmong neighbours approach Walt so that he can order Thao to fix various other household problems. Walt becomes the one with the power to clean the neighbourhood rather than members of the Hmong community who must turn to him for help. The Hmong are portrayed as useless and helpless, while Walt - a white, male - represents self-reliance and fortitude. Similar to depictions of white teachers who must civilize students in ghettoized schools, Walt embodies the “rightness of Whiteness” (Giroux, 1996).

Walt is also depicted as a hero throughout the film, and a role model for Thao, the directionless adolescent. He saves Thao from a local Hmong street gang using his rifle and threats, and becomes the neighbourhood hero. Walt is the quintessential “white messiah,” as Vera and Gordon (2003) discuss, and in turn, the Hmong community showers his doorstep with gifts of food, flowers, and so forth [See Appendix A3]. In a subsequent scene, Walt saves Sue from a group of black youth who are harassing both her and a white male friend. Again, Walt uses violence to deter the threatening youth and earn their respect at the end of the exchange. Walt also becomes a role model for Thao, which is evident in a conversation with Sue. She says, “It’s nice of you to look after him like this. He doesn’t have any real role models in his life... you’re a good man, Wally. I wish our father would’ve been more like you.” Throughout this

conversation, it is evident that Walter is highly respected by Sue and Thao and held in higher esteem than their own father. Sue continues speaking about her father, “No, I’m serious. He was really hard on us, really traditional, and really old-school.” Walt responds, “Yeah, well, I’m old-school.” Reiterating Said’s claim that Western values become superior to all others, Sue answers, “Yeah, but you’re an American.” It is apparent that American values are more highly regarded by the youth than traditional Hmong ones.

Walt is Thao’s protector, and he must save him from the wayward actions of other youth (of colour) in the neighbourhood. He becomes Thao’s teacher and educates him on being a “man.” Walt teaches Thao to exemplify a certain kind of manliness by calling him a “pussy” when he exhibits any type of non-confrontational behaviour or is not assertive with others. Thao resists Walt’s racist remarks, and he says, “I don’t care if you insult me or say racist things. Cuz you know what, I’ll take it.” Walt replies, “Yeah, course you’ll take it, because you have no teeth, you have no balls, kid.” Walt teaches Thao that having “teeth and balls” means to be uncompromising and assertive. This is exemplified in the scene with the barber Martin in which Thao is instructed to listen to “how guys talk” [see Appendix A4]. The way “guys talk” is racist and misogynistic as Martin and Walt exchange banter, including phrases such as Jew (used as a verb), dick-smoking gook, nip, chink and pussy. After having Thao watch their “positive” example, they suggest, “you could talk about a construction job you just came from and bitch about your girlfriend and your car.” Later, after taking Walt’s advice, Thao is able to obtain a job at a construction site. This reinforces the belief that speaking like a “guy” can earn you respect in the real world and reward an individual with economic and social success.

Manliness is defined as being contrary to the way females stereotypically act, which in itself is misogynistic. Throughout the film, Hmong female characters are portrayed as mouthy and persistent as well as obedient, subservient and helpless. After an exchange between Sue, her

mother and Walt, he comments, "Jesus, Joseph and Mary. These Hmong broads are like badgers." Although Sue is a tough and assertive character who can talk back to her harassers, she pays the price by being assaulted and raped. In addition, she must ultimately be saved by Walt. Immigrant women are also seen to support "appropriate" gender roles. For example, in one of the first scenes Thao's grandmother comments, "I'm just so broken-hearted. I want my daughter to find another husband. If she married again there would be a man in the house." Her relative replies, "What about Thao? The man of the house is right there." And she responds, "Look at him washing dishes. He does whatever his sister orders him to do. How could he ever become the man of the house?... No way." The traditional gender roles are reinforced in the immigrant home, showing the "backward" nature that mainstream audiences have come to expect from newcomers.

The youth, especially those of colour, are depicted as insubordinate, violent and a threat to white America. The three youths that harass Sue are all black, and one of the victims is a white boy. In another scene, a group of Hmong youth are seen harassing an older white female neighbour after she drops her groceries. Walt observes them commenting, "What the hell is it with kids nowadays." Ironically, the "kids" featured in the film are all youth of colour. This film reinforces the belief that many viewers hold, that of an increase in violence amongst adolescents. This is also shown in a study by Faucher, in which youth have been perceived as more of a threat to others, committing increasingly heinous crimes (2009). In particular, the gang members are portrayed as especially aggressive and brutish. The Hmong gang savagely attack Thao's family with a drive-by shooting and brutally rape Sue. When Walt takes revenge he announces, "It was either he or you or someone who raped one of their own family. Your own blood, for Chrissake." The Hmong gang members are portrayed as the ultimate barbarians who are sadistic and remorseless. Walt, on the other hand, is violent for the purpose of saving Thao and

reclaiming safety for the neighbourhood. When his aggression backfires, he uses his body as the ultimate sacrifice in order to save Thao and Sue from the Hmong gang members. Walt's death could be seen to parallel Christ's death for his people. This saviour imagery uplifts this racist and hateful white man's status to that of a messiah.

Walt is redeemed from his past actions as a bigot and a racist; however, the actions of the Hmong gang members are never redeemed. Through his sacrifice, Walt becomes the symbol of redemption and forgiveness. Like most "white messiah" characters, Walt is centralised and allowed a dynamic and influential role within the film (Vera & Gordon, 2003). On the other hand, characters of colour are usually static and play supporting roles that embellish the actions of the white film star (ibid). The critical acclaim and popularity of *Gran Torino*, especially amongst youth of colour, is especially problematic because of the negative way in which both the immigrant community (particularly the Hmong) and youth of colour are depicted. A *Washington Times* review of the film stated, "There was a huge surge in business, not just among whites, but among minorities. There was a huge audience among inner-city, African Americans, Latinos - more young people showed up than ever could have been expected...25 percent of the audience was under the age of 25" (2009). In addition, the film reviews perpetuate the stereotypes that are prevalent in the movie with no critical scrutiny. The *Boston Globe* wrote, "Walt looks at the mess the newcomers have made of their properties and growls" (2008). The "ethnic gangs" are a threat to Walt Kowalski who "has watched his inner-city neighborhood dwindle away until he's the last white man standing" (ibid). Both the immigrant community and youth of colour are positioned as a threatening menace to white civilization and must be reformed by the white man.

### **Entre les Murs Analysis**

*Entre les Murs (The Class)* chronicles a year at an inner city middle school in France and features a white French instructor, Francois Marin, and his class of 13-15 year old mostly

immigrant students from various cultural backgrounds (Morocco, Tunisia, Mali, China and the Caribbean, for example). The film focuses on Francois as he interacts with his students both in and out of class, meets with parents and collaborates with school staff. Francois believes some of the students to be disrespectful and insolent. They, in turn, have a number of problems with Francois's teaching style and with material that they feel are irrelevant. The film culminates in the teacher verbally assaulting students that later results in a physical confrontation between Marin and one of the students, Souleymane. The school ultimately decides to expel Souleymane permanently due to his unruly behaviour and lack of academic effort.

It is clear when the teachers are introducing themselves at the beginning of the film that there are a disproportionate number of white teachers and administrators at the school, an accurate reflection of many inner city schools both in Europe and North America. Schools in which the majority of teachers and administration are white and either some or the majority of the student body is racialized, maintain a hierarchy of power due to the unquestioning authority of whiteness. The institutionalization of racism, classism and sexism is evident as the "pro-middle class and Euro-centric male mentality" (Tyyska, 2009) governs the education system. This mentality is manifested in the dominant attitudes, values, norms and practices that educators and administrators produce within the academic culture that consequently leads to the unequal participation of subordinated groups (Henry & Tator, 1994). This is evident in one of the first scenes of the movie when a new instructor is attentively listening to Olivier, a veteran teacher at the school, candidly noting the particular dispositions of different students, "Nice, nice, not nice, not nice at all...He's nice, not nice, watch him, not nice at all, nice, not nice, she's not nice at all." These types of judgments are not specific to youth of colour; however there is a powerful message in this film in particular that paints these inner city students in a very distinct way. The new teacher enters the classroom with preconceived notions of the students, possibly not giving

them a chance to speak for themselves. This is also how the audience enters the theatre to view the students – with preconceived notions of their “badness” or “goodness.” Students must conform to certain white standards in order to succeed academically and within the French system.

There is an emphasis on discipline and how to appropriately manage the troublesome students. It becomes apparent from the beginning that the teachers will have many challenges in maintaining order and control in their classes. In fact, throughout the film we see examples of teachers refusing to work with students with “attitude problems.” One teacher, in particular, has a breakdown in the staffroom.

I'm sick of these clowns! Sick of them! I can't take any more! They're nothing, they know nothing, they look right through you when you try to teach them. They can stay in their shit! I'm not going to help them. They're so basic, so insincere, always looking for trouble. Go ahead, guys. Stay in your crap neighborhood. You'll be here all your lives and it serves you damn well right! ...Have you seen them in the yard? It's like they're in heat! They're all over each other like animals. It's crazy! It's the same in class. Kevin spent a whole hour going... "duh, duh, duh." I've never seen the like of it in 5 years. Enough! No more. We're not animals.

This is a clear example of how students are made to be the problem and how viewers are allowed to see the frustrations and anxieties of the teachers. Viewing the students through the eyes of the teacher causes the audience to be more sympathetic to their plight. The audience can easily commiserate with Francois as he struggles daily with his boisterous and, often times, challenging students. This is a similar viewpoint to that of Giroux in his analysis of the film *Dangerous Minds*, in which a white female teacher reforms Hispanic and black student at a school in the ghetto (1996).

In addition, it is problematic that the students are mainly youth of colour, attending an inner city school. There are never portrayals of white students having disciplinary problems or challenging the authority of their teachers. Therefore, audiences become indoctrinated with the

idea that youth of colour are the problem and that they are the cause of their own subordination and defeat. The systemic challenges that the students face, such as the lack of translation services for non-French speaking parents at the school and the lack of diverse representation amongst the teachers and staff, do not become the problem; rather the more overt behaviours exhibited by the youth that require discipline are the focus. The audience is not informed of the various institutional barriers that may hinder the performance of students or impact their behaviours, for example, poverty or religious persecution both in and out of the school. The major message promoted by this film and many other mainstream films is that white teachers are under a lot of pressure to make sure non-white students obey and are considered successful if these students take on white standards.

The teachers and administrators expect that they will earn instant respect from the students. They expect students to sit quietly and listen, to address them in the proper manner, to stand when they enter a room, and so forth. However, there is no sign of teachers respecting their students or their students' backgrounds. One major issue that is under-addressed in the movie is racism. According to Dei, white educators often avoid the topic of race because they either fear offending individuals or groups or want to deny that race privilege exists (2007). Most of Francois's students are people of colour and often bring questions or comments to class about issues of race. For Freire, recognition of oppression is the first step one needs to take in order to combat it (1970). However, the teacher usually ignores or refuses to engage students about these issues, not allowing them the space they may need to vent or understand more deeply the systemic racism they live within. For example, Rabah, a student, talks to the class about an experience he had at a party with "Camemberters," white, bourgeois partygoers. He explains, "They were all in suits and ties. I was in my baggies and got these weird looks...They looked at me like I was E.T...Why's that Arab here?" Francois looks like he is trying to understand but

does not discuss the issue of race. Rabah also makes an allusion to the difficulties of being Muslim, which the teacher also ignores. Francois could have taken this opportunity to carry on a powerful discussion regarding how race, ethnicity, gender, class and sexuality play a role in access to power and privilege. The film lacks any kind of in-depth analysis of the systemic racism or Islamophobia in France.

Francois is not portrayed as a flawless individual or even as an ideal teacher, which gives credence to his character. Although Francois has his faults, he is uplifted as a saviour, or white messiah, in several instances throughout the film. Francois advocates for his students and stands up for them despite the fact that he is not always in the majority in the staff room. In one instance his advocacy is turned on him when two student representatives betray his confidence and start a dispute in class, which ultimately leads to a physical altercation with another student. The students who betray Francois are unforgiving and their actions are seen as unfair and callous. Therefore, when Francois lashes out and degrades them, he is not punished because his actions have just cause. The audience can have compassion and empathy for his struggles as the film is mostly seen through his white eyes.

The film presents characters that are multifaceted, smart and strong-willed. They are not afraid to talk back to the teacher and engage in debate concerning Francois' teaching methods. For example, Khoumba (a student) interrogates Francois regarding his choice of examples for a French lesson by saying, "What's with the Bills?... You always use weird names. Why don't you use... Aïssata or Rachid or Ahmed or..." Esmeralda follows the inquiry with, "You always use whitey names. It's wicked." Francois responds, "Khoumba, if I start choosing names to suit your different ethnic origins, it'll never end." The students insist that he change the name and are thrilled by their small victory. Unfortunately, the nuanced portrayal of the students resisting authority becomes feeble when it is apparent that they are ultimately powerless. Their lives are at

the mercy of the white teachers and administrators. They must follow their rules and are under their disciplinary actions. There is little support for them as well as a lack of communication between the students, teachers and parents. This becomes evident when Souleymane's mother is unable to get accurate information regarding her son's behaviour and study habits due to language barriers. The school does not provide a translator and therefore, she is left out of the discussion [See Appendix B1]. In one of the last scenes, Souleymane is standing in front of a panel of teachers, administrators, parents and student representatives to decide whether he should be expelled. He is there with his mother who only speaks Malian. It is the ultimate failure of the school when Souleymane must interpret for his mother at his hearing because the school cannot provide appropriate translation services. Souleymane says in defeat, "I don't give a damn. I've got nothing to say. Do whatever you want to do." In the end, he is expelled. His fate, like all of the students, is unknown.

The focus of the film is on the power dynamics in the school and the relationships that develop in the learning environment. However, the viewer sees only through the teacher's eyes, which do not provide an accurate depiction of the forces at work within the school or in society at large that continually impact on the students' lives. The problem that these students face is systemic to the social, political and economic structures available for youth of colour. There is little focus on this system outside of the school and there is no discussion of poverty, religious discrimination, racism, immigration, language barriers, and so forth that influence how young people negotiate their lives. Since there is very little acknowledgement of these institutional barriers in the film, there is also the lack of "conscientization" in which the students problematize these issues, possibly bringing awareness to the social injustices and oppression they face. Although the film offers a space in which young people talk back and question authority, the students are not the primary focus. Rather, the film ultimately speaks to how white teachers handle these

“problematic” students of colour. There is no discussion or analysis of the ways in which white authority governs the lives of these students. In addition, *Entre les Murs* perpetuates the idea of “white teacher as saviour”, as Francois is shown to be “doing his best” for these difficult students. This movie perpetuates the same tired stereotypes like so many mainstream movies based on immigrants and youth of colour. The next section will be an analysis of immigrant youth produced works, including a short film, poetry pieces, a short story and a novel.

## **IMMIGRANT YOUTH PRODUCED WORK**

This section of the study will be analysing a novel, short story, short film and poetry by mainly first and second generation immigrant youth. I will be examining how youth of colour and immigrant youth address issues of inequality and discrimination through film and literary work. Utilizing a critical literacy approach, the following analyses will illuminate the way in which youth contest “othered” identities with counter-narratives that challenge the white dominant norm.

### **Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow Analysis**

*Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow* is the account of a teenager, Doria, living in the projects outside of Paris with her mother. Doria’s father has left for their hometown in Morocco to be remarried to a younger woman. Doria and her mother are left to take care of one another. They are visited by social workers sent by the city and a school psychiatrist to assist with their “predicament”. Through Doria’s eyes, the reader is immersed in the life of an adolescent who has been abandoned by her father, lives in poverty, and faces racism and prejudice as a member of a poor immigrant family in France.

Doria and her mother have regular visits from various social workers who show a lack of cultural sensitivity. The main characters are subjected to ignorant and racist comments by social workers on numerous occasions. Doria talks about a meeting with one social worker in particular; “Once, he told my mom that in ten years on this job, this was the first time he’d seen ‘people like you with only one child.’ He was thinking ‘Arabs,’ but he didn’t say so.” As Chang asserts, immigrants have been constructed as “invaders” who are only concerned about taking advantage of the welfare system (2000). Similar to Mexican women in the United States who have been portrayed as “‘welfare-dependent’ mothers and inordinate breeders of dependents” (Chang, 2000, p. 4), Arab women in France are stigmatized through similar depictions.

Therefore, *Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow* offers a way for readers to question their ideas about immigration and immigrants. There is space to understand the lives of immigrants and relate to their hardships as Doria's voice guides the reader to consider her perspective.

Doria is aware of the self-righteousness that emanates from the social workers. She continues, "Coming to our place was like an exotic experience for him. He kept giving weird looks to all the knick-knacks around the house, the ones my mom brought over from Morocco after she got married. And since we wear babouches at home, he'd take off his shoes when he walked in, trying to do the right thing...The whole time he played the sweet, compassionate type, but it was all a front" (p. 8). The impersonal and often rude manner with which the social service providers address Doria and her mother is documented through the first-hand experiences of the main character. Her disapproval of being treated as a "charity case" is evident as she comments on the way a teacher responds to her, "I get the idea he feels sorry for me or something, and I hate that" (p.17).

Doria's perspective as a patron of social services is often unheard and her commentary allows the reader to see the treatment immigrants face at the hands of so-called "do-gooders." She brings attention to the idea of "lovelessness clothed in false generosity" that Freire discusses in which those with power continue to oppress despite their displays of "false charity", or in the case of Doria, the assistance she receives from the social workers (Freire, 2009, p. 45). Freire contends that oppressors must perpetuate injustice in order to maintain their source of "generosity" (ibid). Therefore, true "generosity" cannot occur unless those without power are given the opportunity to transform themselves and have the freedom to attain self-determined lives. In comparison, *Entre les Murs* features a "do-gooder" who validates himself by working with "troubled youth". In his story, the viewer feels compassion for the teacher and sees the students as the problem. This is completely different from *Kiffe Kiffe, Tomorrow*, in which Doria

not only refuses or resists the false compassion she is shown but also reveals the true motivations of those who often work with underprivileged groups.

Throughout the novel, Doria addresses issues of inequality and discrimination that those living in the projects face. Doria is able to make powerful statements regarding the inequality in France with her recollections of the past. For example, Doria discusses a childhood experience at the playground when she lived close to a housing development.

When I was little and Mom took me to the sandbox, none of the other kids wanted to play with me...there were mostly full-blooded native French families living there. Once, they were all making a circle and no one would hold my hand because it was the day after Eid, the festival of the sheep, and Mom had put some henna on the palm of my right hand. Those morons thought I was dirty. They didn't understand the first thing about social diversity and cultural melting pots. Then again, it wasn't really their fault. There's such a well-drawn line between the Paradise Estate where I live and the Rousseau housing development. Massive wire fencing that stinks of rust it's so old and a stone wall that runs the whole length of the divide. Worse than the Maginot Line or the Berlin Wall (p.81).

Doria's comments regarding the separation between the Rousseau housing developments where the white French reside and the Paradise Estate inhabited by many immigrants and people of colour, recognize the divisions that have been established. This "well-drawn line" is similar to the concept of the "void" that McCarthy discusses, of the divide between whites living in the suburbs and poor whites, blacks and immigrants in the inner-cities across the United States (1998). These residential or physical divisions become barriers and are filled with images and cultural texts fed by film and television (ibid). While most of the images and cultural texts place immigrants, people of colour and poor whites in a negative context, *Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow* refutes these images by deconstructing stereotypes of the projects or the ghetto and the people that reside there. The story presents a number of characters that humanize the residents of the projects and presents characters that are not necessarily drug dealers or gang members. Doria's

account is not focussed on violence, like film and television, but addresses issues of poverty, racism and institutional discrimination.

*Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow* captures the various experiences and adversities that immigrants to France encounter. She reveals the racism and unfair labour practices that many immigrant workers like her mother experience. Through her accounts, the reader is able to understand the hardships her mother, Yasmina, faces as a cleaner at an upscale hotel. Yasmina works for a racist Frenchman named M. Winner who calls “all the Arabs ‘Fatma,’ all the blacks ‘Mamadou,’ and all the Chinese ‘Ping-Pong’” (p. 5). The novel acknowledges the difficulties that many immigrants face in the labour market, not only in France but in many European and North American countries as well. For example, Yasmina is unable to strike with her fellow workers to demand better working conditions because she depends solely on her income to support herself and her daughter. Furthermore, Doria is also able to speak to the disillusionment that many immigrants experience upon settling in their adopted country. She says of her mother, “My mom always dreamed France was like those black-and-white films from the sixties. The ones where the handsome actor’s always telling his woman so many pretty lies, a cigarette dangling from his lips...So when she and my dad arrived in Livry-Gargan, just north of Paris...she thought they must have taken the wrong boat and ended up in the wrong country. She told me that when she walked into this tiny two-room apartment the first thing she did was throw up” (p.11). I believe that Europe and North America are often presented as bastions of peace, equality and prosperity. However, Doria speaks to the reality of France, in particular, that many immigrants face including labour difficulties and racism. The novel provides a realistic account of the immigrant experience and justifies the cynicism that many first generation immigrants have for their adopted countries.

Doria insists that she will not be stereotyped into a particular ideal of what it means to be a young woman. Although Doria is certain that her father left the family because she was not a boy, she is never apologetic. Speaking about the lack of childhood photos she has due to her sex, Doria comments, "Bet if I'd had a dick, I'd have a big fat pile of photo albums, filled with pictures of me" (p.94). Doria resents being treated like a helpless child because she is female, and proves time and time again that she will not stand for condescension, nor does she deserve it as a strong, independent young woman. For example, she talks about her role as a cultural broker for her parents. "I've filled out all the paperwork for Mom, and even when my dad was around, it was me who did it. Even when I'd had enough, because tax forms are like gobbledygook. Once, I asked my dad how he and Mom managed before I could read and write. He thought I was being a smartass. He hit me. And not just a little. He hit me hard for a long time. But I never cried. At least, not in front of him, because dad was like Hamoudi's: He thought girls were weak, that they were made for crying and doing dishes" (p. 129).

Doria is a heroine who realizes the importance of crying and is not apologetic about doing it. She does not deem it a sign of weakness, but sees its value. She is a strong female who is not afraid to question the sexism that is apparent in the world she lives in. Comparing Doria to Sue, the main female character in *Gran Torino*, shows stark differences between their characters and how they are portrayed. Sue is shown to be a bossy older sister with the ability to speak up to a few street thugs; however, her role as a "tough" female character is ultimately deflated because she is always in need of help from her neighbour Walt. The focus becomes the male characters in the movie and how they are the true heroes, a common depiction in mainstream media. Doria, on the other hand, is strong and independent throughout the novel. Her character is dynamic and evolving compared to Sue's static character. Doria's voice takes center stage and she is in control of her life.

Doria is not a passive character who merely observes the disparity and discrimination she experiences. She questions the unfairness and invites the reader to draw similar comparisons to the projects outside the city where “parasite journalists with their nasty reports on violence in the suburbs” (p. 116) swarm and the wealthy city center of Paris in which tourists flock to take pictures of the Eiffel Tower. She discusses the decay of the housing developments in the projects due to the lack of political power that the residents have. She declares, “You have no political usefulness if you don’t vote. Me, when I’m eighteen, I’ll go vote. Here, a person never gets a chance to be heard. So when we get the chance, we have to take it” (p. 89). Doria makes it clear that she will be proactive in fighting injustice, which challenges the myth that young people, in particular young immigrants, are not interested in politics or voting (Ginwright, Noguera & Cammarota, 2006). *Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow* provides an avenue for readers to be made conscious of the oppressions that immigrants and people living in the projects endure. Like Freire who spoke to and on behalf of the oppressed in South America, Doria represents a young voice who speaks to the power relations at play in the projects outside of Paris.

Although Doria has many obstacles to overcome, she also maintains a positive outlook on life. She thinks about others and has a genuine interest in helping people, from the local begging “gypsy guy” to starving Somalis. Her experiences living in the projects and surviving with her mother give her the chance to empathize with others and ultimately become an activist. Doria exemplifies the idea that Freire upholds in which “only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free [the oppressed and their oppressors]” (Freire, 2009, p. 44). Doria is an admirable character who “always keep[s] a little hope and [isn’t] scared of losing” (p. 122). She is hopeful of the future and aspires to make changes to the community. Despite the challenges that she faces, in the end Doria declares, “And lots of things need changing around here...Hey, that gives me an idea. Why don’t I go into politics?” (p. 179).

## **I Have a Name! Analysis**

*I have a name!* by Karishma Kapil is a short story about the school experience of a young girl from Zambia who immigrates to Canada. It is a memoir of Kapil's first day of primary school as a newcomer to the Toronto District School Board. On her first day of school, Kapil is escorted by her mother to meet with the principal who places Kapil in a grade level lower than she was in Zambia and insists that she attend ESL classes. Her mother protests, "ESL? What do you mean ESL? English is her first language. It is February right now...she was in grade six in Zambia, which means that she did half the year. Why not put her in grade six?" The principal responds, "Well, our education standards in Canada are a lot higher than what you may have had back in Africa. I do not think she will be able to cope in grade six here. ESL is just going to help her integrate properly in an English speaking society." First of all, the principal's assumption that Canada's educational standards are higher than in 'Africa' is problematic because it is indicative of the power structures that are inherently set up to maintain the subordination of the "other." The principal is in a position of power over Kapil because he has the authority to make decisions for her. Therefore, his understanding of Kapil as a newcomer from Africa and a female has great implications on the outcome of her educational experience. The principal's assumption that Kapil has received an insufficient level of education in Africa exemplifies his presumed superiority and her presumed inferiority. Instead of recognizing his relative privilege or systematic discrimination, the principal focuses on her "disadvantages" and "differences" as a newcomer (Dei, James, Karumanchery, James-Wilson & Zine, 2000).

The principal's othering of Kapil reflects the consistent viewpoint held by many Western institutions that anything outside of North America is considered substandard or insufficient, including cultural traditions, education, job skills or training, and so forth. "Unequally structured material and social conditions" allow white, middle class students to succeed over students who

are “othered” or not part of the dominant group (Dehli, 1996 in Dei, et al., 2000). Since the North American educational system requires all students to conform to Eurocentric middle-class norms and expectations, students like Kapil are placed at a disadvantage from the beginning as was exemplified by her first day of school. For young immigrants entering public school districts in North America, this expectation can have a detrimental impact on their psychological and social development. Studies have shown that marginalized youth use their identities to resist domination in schools by demonstrating anti-school behaviour such as truancy, “acting out” and also dropping out (Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac & Zine, 1997). In order to provide students like Kapil with a more inclusive educational and social experience, a pedagogical practice that validates their multiple identities and experiences by accommodating the diverse histories, values and beliefs into the system of learning is necessary (Dei, et al., 2000).

In addition, Kapil was not properly assessed by the principal who had the power to make decisions about her education. He made assumptions about her English ability as well as her learning capacity with little more than a perusal of her records. Kapil captures the reality that many immigrant students face when entering the Canadian school system. The principal assesses Kapil, employing his own judgement of her academic level, informed by his Eurocentric beliefs. He justifies his initial placement with the assumption that Canadian standards are higher than in Africa, therefore it is unnecessary for her to take an assessment test. Both elementary and secondary schools in the Toronto District School Board usually conduct their own assessments, despite their lack of proper assessment tools, skills and guidelines. The lack of district wide assessment procedures, guidelines, and the inconsistency of measuring equivalency do not allow an accurate assessment of a student’s educational background, English proficiency and academic achievement (Regier, Goossen, DiGiuseppe & Campey, 2005). Therefore, students are often inadequately placed and left at the mercy of the stereotypes and prejudices that staff or teachers

have of them, as exemplified in Kapil's story. Immigrant students are usually assessed with little or no regard for their differing cultural backgrounds and educational experiences.

After the insistence of her mother, it is decided that Kapil will spend a week in a sixth grade class as a trial to prove her English and grade level capabilities. Through Kapil's voice, the reader is able to visualize her struggle to be recognized as a human being on her first day of school. She is continually being treated by the principal, teachers and her peers as if she were stupid and not capable of understanding English. She speculates, "Why did everyone talk like they were shouting? Did they think I was deaf?" Through her observations, Kapil articulates that she is very cognizant of her surroundings and the way everyone treats her. When the teacher introduces Kapil to her classmates, she comments, "How come his voice wasn't loud when he spoke to them? And he wasn't speaking slowly anymore." The teacher continues, "We have a new addition to our classroom. She has come all the way from Africa and is going to be joining us for the rest of the year." Kapil, unable to respond, thinks, "Africa? Why was he saying Africa? Africa is a continent not a country. Would they not say that they are from Canada or would they say they are from North America?" Kapil's observations are profound as she is able to critique the teacher's behaviour and bring to light his insensitivity towards her as well as his complete disrespect for her past experiences and history. Kapil's experience illuminates Dei's argument in which he states that newcomers to Canada are alienated due to their "socially devalued identities," and encounter problems in the school because of differential treatment or misrecognition of a student's racial identity (2008). Throughout her account, Kapil questions the assumptions that the principal, teachers, and students have made about her, and in that way brings attention to the differential and negative treatment she receives.

When the students taunt Kapil by saying, "Look, the refugee does not even have a winter jacket," she comments, "I put my head down and pretended not to have heard. I felt like shouting

that I had a name and that I was not a refugee.” Time and time again, Kapil is ostracized and made to feel like an outsider because she is considered a “foreigner” and therefore unintelligent and backwards. It is evident through her interactions with school staff and peers that there is a lack of understanding of and sensitivity to her situation. At recess, she is not dressed appropriately and seeks warmth in the building. She is approached by a teacher who says, “Are you the new girl? You have to go outside. You are not allowed inside when it is recess. I know it was warm in the jungle, but wild animals are able to adapt to different weather conditions.” It is evident that the teacher does not even see Kapil as a human being, but as a “wild animal.” The reader begins to understand the racism that permeates educational institutions and how these experiences silence students in numerous ways. No one wants to listen to Kapil because they have already made assumptions about her based on the stereotypes that are ingrained in their own thinking.

When she is asked to go to the front of the classroom to introduce herself to the class, she is unable to respond due to nervousness and the events she had recently experienced. As a result, it is assumed that she can't speak English and she is sent to the ESL teacher who is the only person to talk to her like a person rather than an object. The ESL teacher realizes that Kapil is, in fact, cognizant of English and requests a proper assessment to determine Kapil's abilities. Kapil writes, “I did not want to leave this teacher, she was nice. She was the only one that asked my name. I did not want to go back to that other classroom. No one called me by my name. They called me the refugee African girl.” Kapil is well aware of how she is labelled and mistreated in school, and through her account the reader is able to appreciate her cultural critique of the school environment. Although Kapil is made to feel inferior, it is clear that she is an intelligent, insightful individual who has the capacity to articulate her frustrations and annoyance.

Kapil's account of her first day of school with the Toronto school district is telling of the experiences that many newcomer students face, not only to Canada but many other countries. Her story gives voice to marginalized individuals who are often silenced by the institutional racism that legitimizes discrimination. Through her experiences of being labelled a "refugee African girl" and less than a human being, the reader can begin to understand the hardships that many newcomers face. Her story also identifies a number of problems within the school system such as inappropriate assessment and an insensitive school environment that create hostile conditions for newcomer immigrant students. Through *I have a name!*, the audience is able to understand the struggles that Kapil faces on her first day of school through her perspective rather than through those of the teacher or administration, like in *Entre les Murs*. Kapil provides us with the opposite viewpoint, allowing the reader to see the ways in which immigrant students are marginalized. Kapil is able to critique the school system by showing us her reality, and by pointing out the numerous ways she is made to feel inferior and inadequate because she is an immigrant from a certain region of the world. Kapil's narrative refutes whiteness as the norm by recognizing the way in which her identity is subordinated. She centralizes her own self-worth within story.

### **Slip of the Tongue Analysis**

*Slip of the Tongue* is a short film, produced and directed by Karen Lum and based on a spoken word poem by Adriel Luis. The short was featured on Youth Reel, an online collection of youth produced film, and was the winner of Youth Reel's best overall film and best editing award. The short film is based on an encounter between two adolescents. A young man's attempt to flirt with a young woman at a city bus stop leads to his re-education on "make-up" (a play on words) and hair dyeing. The young woman expresses her politicized ideas of ethnic "make-up" and reveals a profound understanding of gender and race and their relationship to the structural hierarchies in

society. She also talks about commercialism and the impact the industry has on young women's identities.

In the beginning scene, a young man is approaching a young woman he finds attractive and is contemplating how to win her affection. As he looks at her, he proclaims, "the weakness of my masculinity kicks in, causing me to personify my wannabe big-baller, short-caller, God's gift to the female species with shiny suit wrapping rapping", while scenes flash by of the young man ordering drinks at a bar, smoking and playing cards. These acts portray a normative masculinity that is characterized by "heterosexuality, emotional control, and aggressive social dominance" (Pratt Ewing, 2008, p.12). The images convey an understanding of "what men do", how men relate to others, and the ways in which men often feel compelled to put on a tough, superior persona. These ideas of masculinity are common to many mainstream films where the tough guy always wins over the lady. The young man calls this behaviour a "weakness of masculinity", and therefore expresses the not-often-heard opinion that cocky manliness is not the ultimate or best expression of masculinity. He recognizes these stereotypes and begins to unpack what it means to be masculine in Western society, yet he also uses this type of masculinity to address the woman. He chooses to display behaviour that is associated with societies in which men hold a significant amount of power compared to women (Hongdagneu-Sotelo & Messner, 1994). The words and images show the viewer how the relationship between males and females is dictated by society. The viewer sees how his expressions of masculinity, in fact, become a barrier to wooing the young woman. The young woman's understanding of how expressions of masculinity are tied to power and privilege becomes clear when she refuses to give in to the young man's display of masculinity.

Carrying on with his feeble attempt to flirt, the young man blurts out "Gurl, what is your ethnic makeup?" The young woman replies, "Ethnic make-up? First of all, makeup's just an

anglicized, colonized, commodified utility that my sisters have been programmed to consume, forcing them to cover up their natural state in order to imitate what another sister looks like in her natural state because people keep telling her that the other sister's natural state is more beautiful than the first sister's natural state. At the same time, the other sister isn't even in her natural state, because she's trying to imitate yet another sister, so in actuality, the natural state that the first sister's trying to imitate wasn't even natural in the first place." Concurrently, the viewer sees images of the young woman putting on make-up, looking through fashion magazines, comparing herself with other women, and dressing over and over again. These images provide a powerful statement of the way in which women are continually being manipulated to fit into a proscribed idea of beauty. Many of these ideas are fed to young women through television, film and advertisements. Mainstream media often ignores issues of identity and belonging that women of colour struggle with by presenting only the image of the white, middle-class norm. hooks argues that black people as well as other people of colour are so saturated with white supremacist ideas that they cannot help but internalize these values (1992). Embracing whiteness causes many minority groups to internalize racism and reject the identities that do not conform to the mainstream or status quo ideals. Although the scenes in *Slip of the Tongue* show anguish and pain as the young woman seeks to find acceptance with her peers and herself, there is also a clear refutation of the white norm (Nakayama & Krisek, 1995).

The young woman re-educates the young man by using make-up as a way to describe her identity. She continues, "Fine. I'll tell you 'bout my 'ethnic makeup.' I wear foundation, not that powdery shit. I wear the foundation laid by my indigenous people. It's that foundation that makes it so that past being globalized, I can still vocalize with confidence that I know where my roots are. I wear this foundation not upon my face, but within my soul, and I take this from my ancestors because I'll be damned if I'd ever let an American or European corporation tell me

what my foundation should look like.” The viewer sees images of the young woman being inundated with representations of young, blond, white women in film and magazines. It recognizes the complete saturation of Eurocentric ideals in media that all women of colour must tolerate. These shots are juxtaposed with images of her looking through family photographs. This is where she must find strength in order to critique the Western idea of beauty. The young woman’s “critical and strong sense of self, self-worth, and purpose” elucidates the belief that social identity affirmation is necessary (Dei, 2008, p. 355). It is important to promote messages of self-affirmation to young women, in particular. According to a study of ethnic identity and self esteem of children of immigrants, females had significantly lower self esteem and higher rates of depressive symptomatology compared to their male counterparts (Rumbaut, 1994). This scene offers the chance for the viewer to redefine their ideas of beauty and begin to question the way in which women are framed within media which is not seen in both *Gran Torino* and *Entre les Murs*. The ability to critique socially constructed ideas of beauty allows young women to gain self-worth and establish a strong sense of self. In that way, young women are able to recognize alternative forms of beauty.

She addresses the issue of weight and how women hurt themselves to attain the idealized size that men want. She proclaims, “And I don’t wear lipstick, for my lips stick to the ears of men, so they can experience in surround sound my screams of agony with each lash of rulers, measuring tape, and scales, as if my waistline and weight are inversely proportional to my value as a human being.” The film shows the young woman being convinced by magazines to “lose weight,” measuring her waistline, exercising and viewing herself in the mirror. These images attempt to convince the viewer of the madness of our society’s obsession with weight. She says, “See my lips; they stick, but not together. Rather, they flail open with flames to burn down this culture that once kept them shut.” These lines are said in conjunction with images of the young woman

eating instead of dieting and participating in the everyday life of China Town. The scenes demonstrate the existence of an “alternative” representation of China Town, seen through the eyes of a young Chinese American rather than a white adult. The young woman becomes the storyteller, or “counterstory” teller in which she is able to provide the background to understand and transform established belief systems (Delgado, 1989). Drawing strength from her roots or ethnic background, she refutes stereotypes of the Asian female as submissive, docile or voiceless. By taking pride in her Asian identity, the young woman fights against the messages that encourage her to embrace Eurocentric ideas of beauty. This is similar to the immigrant characters in the two mainstream movies previously analysed, who also seem to draw strength from their histories. However, “Slip of the Tongue” forces the viewer to confront the realities of mainstream society and focuses more on the hardships that people of colour in particular women, face.

The young woman refuses to be silenced, and is empowered by her understanding of how mass media and corporations collude to keep women from accepting their own natural bodies. She says, “Now, I mess with eye shadow, but my eyes shadow over this time where you’ve gone at ends to keep me blind. But you can’t cover my eyes, look into them.” She refuses to look away, and she demands the viewer to open her/his eyes to the daily assault she faces as a young woman and as a young woman of colour. Her knowledge gives her the power to refute the messages that surround her and gives her hope as she declares, “My eyes foreshadow change. My eyes foreshadow light.” However, there is also recognition of how these representations dominate her life. She asserts, “And I’m not into hair dyeing. But I’m here, dying, because this oppression won’t get out of my hair...I have these highlights. They are highlights of my past atrocities. They form this oppression I can’t wash off...It’s stressing me so that even though I don’t color my hair, in a couple of years it’ll look like I dyed it gray.”

Using make-up as a platform to address the various oppressions that women, especially those of colour, face, the film empowers the viewer to rethink their understanding of these issues. In the last scene, the young woman finishes by saying, “So what’s my ethnic makeup? I don’t have any. Because your ethnicity isn’t something you can just make up. And as for that crap my sisters paint on their faces, that’s not makeup, it’s make-believe.” Her final statement leaves both the young man and the viewer in awe as she articulates such a profound understanding of the systems that undermine women and keep them in a state of subjugation. The young man says in defeat, “I can’t seem to look up at her...As her footsteps fade, my ego is left in crutches. And rejection never sounded so sweet.” In these last lines, the young man concedes power and revels in the discovery of the young woman’s voice. Her insights have inspired him and he has honest admiration for her intelligence and strength of mind and character. His initial admiration for her outer appearance seems to fade away as he is humbled by her wisdom and knowledge. This message is empowering for young women, especially those of colour, because it critically explores the issues of image and power and promotes the idea that females ultimately have authority over their bodies. In addition, *Slip of the Tongue* acknowledges that women are more than a body, but are intelligent beings with critical minds. This portrayal is not common to most mainstream films and is not found in *Gran Torino* or *Entre les Murs*.

### **Youth Poetry Analysis**

The following work is from a Vancouver based youth-produced writing project called *The Colouring Book*. The writing piece is untitled and written by Hari who immigrated to Canada when he was twelve years old. It is a spoken word piece about migration and the threat of immigration felt by the mainstream. It discusses racism towards immigrants and the discrimination that labourers, in particular, face. It is a rich poem that reflects the author’s multiple ethnic backgrounds and experiences as a young immigrant living in Canada.

In Hari's first two stanzas, he writes about the two ethnic backgrounds, East Indian and Filipino, that he is a product of, and the experiences these groups have as immigrants to different countries, where they face racism and domination. In the first stanza, he writes "Denied a job on sight and called D.P., Hindu & Paki interchangeable/ When 3 or more of me show up we drop the value of your property/ And apparently reduce your high class establishment to savagery" (42). Hari proposes that in Western society, brown people all look the same and there is no need to differentiate between the cultures since they are irrelevant to the nation-building of North America. He also alludes to the idea that white settler societies are structured on a racial hierarchy where whites are recognized as legitimate and entitled to the land or place they inhabit (Razack, 2007). Therefore, when people of colour and immigrants begin to establish themselves in a particular area, often times white people tend to leave in order to maintain the divide. This usually results in the dilapidation of these neighbourhoods because developers are not willing to put money into non-white areas. In mainstream media, immigrants are often seen to inhabit neighbourhoods that are falling apart and impoverished such as in *Gran Torino*. It is often implied that they are the cause of such decay.

Hari's piece addresses the challenges that immigrants face with employment and poverty. He refers to the way in which South Asians and Filipinos are used as disposable pawns in order to continually construct a nation that is based on a hierarchy of white domination (Arat-Koc, 2006). In his second stanza he writes, "My accent is that Carabao English: a rhythm spoken by millions of women placed in nanny positions but living and resisting and exhibiting strength against your demotion of her work and value of emotions. My echo is loud cuz I'm unseen, even though I'm exported to every port and then deported/ Even though my labour is visible in your skyscrapers/ And even though I've done much more than change your parents' diapers/ Fuck. You" (ibid). Hari presents a different perspective of the Filipino nanny by bringing attention to the lack of

recognition and compensation for the vital service they provide. Jiwani notes that minority groups are regularly excluded and marginalized in media (1995). The experiences of Filipino women working in domestics in Western countries such as Canada and the United States are rarely made visible and their suffering goes unnoticed (Hochschild, 2002). Therefore, Hari's piece is important because it also recognizes the strength of character of these women and their oppositional efforts despite the fact that they are dispossessed or commodified in many Western countries.

Hari also explores the idea that older, more established immigrant communities turn against newer immigrants. In the following lines, he addresses this issue: "And some of me call my own communities lazy/ When I make it out of the gutter/ And shudder at the thought of even more me's crossing the borders/ And cheer for the same values I hold responsible for my abuse/ And refuse to listen to the realness of he's and she's and outsiders in between" (p. 43). The increased influx of immigrants means more competition and represents a threat to nation building. These ideas are fed by the capitalist way of life that promotes the idea that success means the acquisition of money which in turn encourages commercialism. The increased competition between individuals leads to ruptures within the community. Therefore, when immigrant communities "turn" on one another, the blame is never placed on the systematic devices that create animosity and tension but on the immigrants themselves. Like the Hmong community in *Gran Torino*, immigrant groups are depicted as barbaric, backwards and negligent by media. Often times in mass media, this is the reasoning suggested for violence and tension between immigrant groups.

The next piece, entitled *Canadian Cancer* by Saira Najarali, is a poem about belonging and identity. It is part of a collection of stories and poems written by York University students regarding their childhood and school experiences. It concerns the assimilation of immigrant

children into the dominant culture and the pressures that they bear in order to fit into the expectations of the dominant society, specifically mainstream Canada. The poem is about the relationship between a young woman and her mother. The young woman must choose between the pressures to conform to Canadian values and those of her family's. She ultimately decides that she wants to belong in Canada, resulting in a cultural divide that separates her from her mother.

In the first three stanzas Najarali struggles with questions that she receives from peers and the advice that her mother provides. For example, she writes "Why don't you wear make-up?/ Why don't you date boys?/ My mom says our traditions are different..." (p. 206). Najarali writes about the pressures that she feels from her peers and juxtaposes them with the advice that her mother gives. However, she is unable to refuse the demands that her new society has for her. She writes, "I want blonde hair,/ I want blue eyes,/ I was to shop at the GAP,/ I want the boys to like me,/ I want the girls to like me,/ I WANT TO BELONG!"(ibid). It is evident that Najarali wants to be a white middle class teenager in order to feel a sense of belonging, and therefore, must conform to these standards. For many immigrant youth who already feel ostracized by a number of barriers such as language and culture, the demands to feel "normal" are enhanced. The author's yearning to belong by adhering to white middle class values and ideas elucidates hook's (1992) idea of internalizing racism which causes a rejection of non-white identities. In mainstream media, the white middle class ideals are normalized and very little attention is paid to the difficulties this creates for immigrant youth.

In addition, Najarali writes, "Bleach the hair,/ Apply the first coat of make-up,/ The transformation has begun./My first sip of alcohol,/ My first sexual encounter,/ The transformation is working...I BELONG!/BUT where do I belong?/ Yelling matches at home,/ Incessant arguing,/ Hurtful words,/ Painful sobs,/ My mother shakes me,/ "DON'T LOSE YOURSELF TO THIS!!

WAKE UP!!!!”/My mother’s screaming is futile,/ She doesn’t understand...I belong./I am a true Canadian now” (p. 206-207). For Najarali, like many immigrant youth, assimilating into Canadian society is a difficult process that can be damaging to family relations and individual development. This cultural divide is not often addressed. For example, in *Entre les Murs* the film is exclusively shot at the school and therefore, does not present us with enough information to actually understand the lives of the students or the problems they face in their private lives. The students, many of whom are immigrants or children of immigrants, are stripped of any history or background, and the viewer cannot see their struggles.

In the end, as Najarali watches her mother die of cancer, she contemplates her own sickness. “Years later, I sit at my mother’s hospital bedside,/Tubes coming out of her from every direction, And then, /The heart monitor reveals no pulse./ This time I shake her,/ “DON’T LOSE YOURSELF TO THIS!! WAKE UP!!!!!!”/ My screaming is futile/The cancer has overcome her, /My mother is gone./ And so am I./ My childhood innocence is gone forever,/ My identity has been stripped away,/ My own cancer has deprived me of the core of my existence,/Canadian cancer has overcome me” (p. 207-208). For Najarali, the decision to opt for Canadian culture and mainstream values has had a devastating impact on her relationship with her mother as well as her own self-esteem. She believes that the decision she made in the past in order to fit into Canadian society cost her “the core of [her] existence.” Messages that portray youth of colour as deviant Najarali’s poem speaks to many immigrant youth who must choose between the values of the dominant culture over those of the family, causing uneasiness and tension at home and within the self.

The following piece is taken from the *Asian Arts Freedom School Anthology* based in Toronto. *My great aunt packed up all the things*, written by Kenji Tokawa, is about identity and living as a mixed race person in Canada. Throughout the poem, he questions his “roots” and

where he is from. In the first few stanzas, Tokawa explains how his great aunt was in a hurry to move to a new house so she decided to donate her books and magazines to a library, where they asked her how many cartons of books she had. She replied,

I have no cartons. I only have rice bags. Seventeen rice bags full of books./” Tokawa’s response is, “Now,/ How Asian can you get?/ and how can i get there?/because i/ 1. don’t speak Japanese like my name tells you that i should and then i/2. was born in Brampton, to a/ 3. white mother and a/ 4. 3<sup>rd</sup> generation father who also/ 5. can’t speak Japanese and if you ask him where he’s from he’ll tell you loftily, He’s a Canadian and my/ 6. grandmother, whom I do still call Bachan, was born in a Vancouver house/That is/7. according to my google search and estimation,/ 8000 kilometres away from where it is i am from (p. 63).

Tokawa takes pride in his aunt’s “Asian-ness” and strives to be more like her. He measures how he can become more Asian despite the numerous details that remove him from his Asian history, or Asian story. For example, he cannot speak Japanese and his grandmother was not born on Japanese soil. The removal of the history of Asian Canadians from mainstream consciousness creates a lack in Tokawa’s life. The “whitewashing” of Canadian history has removed him from his roots as a Japanese. As Njeri posits, “So institutionalized is the ignorance of our history, our culture, our everyday existence, that, often, we do not even know ourselves (in hooks, 1992, p. 172). Tokawa contests the white norm as the ideal state of being by validating his Asian ancestry and incorporating it into his identity. His unconventional views provide possibilities of understanding and creating one’s self beyond the status quo. In his poem, Tokawa challenges the labels that he has been assigned by bringing attention to how his lived reality does not coincide with the expectations an individual might have about him.

The issue of identity is an important one for many adolescents. Youth from multiple ethnic or racial backgrounds are placed in a particularly difficult position of negotiating their various identities within Canada, which is still considered a “white” nation by its own residents (Mackey, 1999). Tokawa is continually asked, “Where are you from?” Although Tokawa was born and

raised in Canada, he is still thought to be a foreigner. “Over 8000 kilometres away from where it is i am not from./ But instead am in a place where people every day, strangers on the street, on the/Bus, in the line for a bagel ask me:/ Where are you from?/ What can a hapa say to satisfy such an insatiable question? Not the truth” (ibid). As a person of mixed heritage, with a Japanese Canadian father and an Irish Canadian mother, Tokawa has to figure out how to fit into a society that will not accept him as he is. He realizes upon answering the question of where he is from that he cannot give any believable answer, as even the truth does not satisfy listeners. The reader is forced to recognize that Tokawa cannot really be labelled into any category. He continues,

I am you. Because like you, i only know what they tell me./ And then i play my role to make it easy for you to label me./ So that we can discuss geographies while looking at the shapes of each other’s eyes/ suspiciously to see just what it is that you or me is lying to me or you about.../... i am from pangea/ i am from the ocean/ i am from the soil and the sun turning me darker like my gichan my grandfather/ from the east/ and i am from the west/ from between my mother’s bloodied and placenta stained white legs/ and when she screamed it woke me up to the fact that wherever it is i am from/ i am here now, and there’s no going back (p. 64).

Tokawa’s poem is filled with pride at his subordinated identity and his roots. He embraces his Asian-ness and looks for ways to find deeper connections with his Asian history. This is missing from *Gran Torino*, where the main immigrant characters do not have this sense of pride and dignity that fills Tokawa’s poem. Thao and Sue look to Walt for advice and direction, and the community praises Walt for his exploits. The students in *Entre les Murs*, on the other hand, do have a sense of pride and dignity relating to their ethnic backgrounds. The students continually fight to be represented in the classroom, for instance, by demanding that Francois change the names in his examples, or by discussing their religious beliefs in the classroom.

Tokawa’s piece is a powerful reminder of where we all come from – Mother Nature, and our own mothers’ wombs. We create distinctions based on race and ethnicity that we then use to classify ourselves and others. This is shown by Walt’s judgements of the Hmong in *Gran*

*Torino*, and the judgements of the teachers towards immigrant youth (and the students, towards their white teachers) in *Entre les Murs*. Tokawa attempts to bridge the differences of “us” versus “them” by bringing attention to our similarities as human beings. He contests questions of “Where are you from?” by pointing out that we are all from the same place.

## CONCLUSION

As demonstrated in *Gran Torino* and *Entre les Murs*, mainstream media representations of youth of colour and immigrant youth are often negative and reinforce stereotypes and racist ideologies. In both films, the youth of colour are portrayed as deviant, problematic and uncivilized. *Gran Torino*, in particular, depicts the young immigrant characters as wayward, backwards and barbaric with imagery of community degradation and gang violence. The representations that were observed in the two films work to inform a racialized discourse (Henry & Tator, 2002, Fairclough, 1995, Jiwani, 1995, Van Dijk, 1991) that continues to other people of colour.

Secondly, the mainstream films are narrated and portrayed through the white, male perspective. White Eurocentric and Anglo-American values and norms are centered and made a fundamental part of each story (Mahtani, 2001, Jiwani, 1995, Hall, 1990). In *Entre les Murs*, the audience is consistently exposed to the emotional expressions and thoughts of the white teachers. The white male voice in the two films informs the audience, and in this way, the white dominant group defines and validates its own identity and legitimacy in society (Vera & Gordon, 2003, Giroux, 1996, hooks, 1996).

In both *Gran Torino* and *Entre les Murs*, the characters, particularly those of colour, are ahistoricized and the audience is given little knowledge about their backgrounds or private lives (hooks, 1992). In addition, the racialized characters face a number of institutional barriers, such as poverty and racism, in the two mainstream films; however, they are either made responsible for their own problems or the causes of their problems are not discussed (Wilson, 2007, Hosang, 2006). For example, in *Entre les Murs* there are no references to the impact that conditions of the urban ghetto may have on the performance or behaviour of the students. The problems students face are shown to be personal rather than societal, and teachers do not address these barriers to

success (Dei, 2008). This is in direct contrast to *Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow*, in which the problems inner city students face is central to the story.

The immigrant youth produced work directly discusses the hardships that youth of colour and immigrant youth encounter and examines them critically. For example, *Slip of the Tongue* focuses on the way in which women of colour are often co-opted by European and American ideals of beauty. Hari, in his untitled poem, discusses the difficulties that Filipina labourers encounter throughout the developed world.

In contrast to the mainstream works, youth of colour representations in the youth produced works are much more dynamic and empowered. The characters do not necessarily need the help of a white patriarch such as Walt in *Gran Torino*. In *Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow*, Doria is portrayed as intelligent, self assured, and mature. She is aware of the social inequalities and discrimination that she faces, and addresses them unabashedly. Like Doria, many of the youth in the youth produced works have provocative thoughts and ideas that are significant to changing their lives. They offer powerful narratives that critique and analyse issues of oppression and social inequality.

The youth produced works are often from the viewpoint of the racialized youth; therefore, they provide a distinctly different perspective than the mainstream films by moving the focus away from the white dominant voice. In all of the youth produced work that I analysed, there is a critique of how the dominant white group controls the lives of youth of colour. For example, in *I Have a Name* and *Canadian Cancer* the writers discuss how they are made to feel marginal and abnormal as racialized individuals in Canadian society. Their counter-narratives refute their “othered” identities by identifying the white dominant forces that oppress them.

As demonstrated in this paper, immigrant youth and youth of colour provide narratives that fight against social oppression and reclaim subordinated identities. Their prior knowledge and

lived experiences are central to their work and provide an authentic picture of living as a young immigrant or person of colour in “Western” society. Their stories have the power to raise awareness of oppressive conditions within their communities and problematize those conditions within society. The counter-narratives have the possibility of transforming the self as well as the audience, and ideally can lead to social action and change.

## APPENDIX A: GRAN TORINO

### Appendix A1

Walt: Well, no Pabst, but plenty of beer.

Sue: As they say, when in Humong.

Walt: Ha, ha. Hey, what am I doing wrong? Every time I look at somebody, they always look at the ground.

Sue: [waves hand] You're fine.

Grandma speaking to Walt in Hmong.

Walt: What's she saying?

Sue: She said, welcome to her home.

Walt: Oh, no, she's not.

Sue: Yeah, no, she didn't.

Walt: She hates me. Come on.

Sue: Yeah, she hates you.

Walt: Okay, hey [pats child on head]

Guests and family simultaneously shudder and look at Walt in disgust.

Walt: Hey, what are all you fish heads looking at anyway?

Sue: I think we should go into the other room. Sorry. [apologizing to guests] A lot of people in this house are very traditional. Number one, never touch a Hmong person on their head, not even a child. Hmong people believe that the soul resides on the head, so don't do that.

Walt: Well, sounds dumb, but fine.

Sue: Yeah, and a lot of Hmong people consider looking someone in the eye to be very rude.

That's why they look away when you look at them.

Walt: Anything else?

Sue: Yeah. Some Hmong people tend to smile or grin when they're yelled at. It's a cultural thing. It expresses embarrassment or insecurity. It's not that they're laughing at you or anything.

Walt: Yeah. God, you people are nuts. But the food does look good. Smells good too.

Sue: Well, of course. It's Hmong food.

Walt: Yeah. Okay. Can I come back for seconds?

### Appendix A2

Walt: Son of a bitch, I never thought he'd show. All right, what are you good at?

Thao: Like what?

Walt: Well, that's what I'm asking. If you're gonna work for me, I gotta know what you're good at. I gotta know what you can do.

Thao: I don't know.

Walt: Well, that's kind of halfway what I expected you to say. You see that tree right there? You just go over there and count the birds.

Thao: You want me to count the birds?

Walt: Yeah, you can count. All you slopes are supposed to be good at math, right?

Thao: Yeah, I can count.

Walt: Good.

Thao: [counting and pointing at the tree] One, two...

### Appendix A3

Hmong neighbours leave gifts of food and flowers.

Walt: Stay right there. Stay right there. Why can't you people just leave me alone?

Sue: We brought you some shallots to plant.

Walt: I don't want them.

Sue: They're perennials. They come back every year.

Walt: Why are you bringing me all this garbage anyway?

Sue: Because...because you saved Thao.

Walt: I didn't save anybody. I just...I kept a bunch of jabbering gooks off of my lawn, that's all.

Sue: Well, you're a hero to the neighbourhood.

Walt: I'm not a hero.

Sue: Too bad, they think you are. That's why they keep bringing you gifts. Please take them.

Walt: Well, they're wrong. Now, I just want to be left alone. Thank you.

### Appendix A4

Walt: Now you're gonna learn how guys talk. You just listen to the way Martin and I batter it back and forth. You okay? You ready?

Thao: Sure.

Walt: All right. Let's go in.

Martin looking at half naked women in a magazine.

Martin: Perfect. A Polack and a chink.

Walt: How you doing, Martin, you crazy Italian prick?

Martin: You cheap bastard, I should've known you'd come in. I was having such a pleasant day.

Walt: What's you do, Jew some poor blind guy out of his money? Gave him the wrong change?

Martin: Who's the Nip?

Walt: Oh, he's a pussy kid from next door. I'm just trying to man him up a little bit.

Martin: Mm.

Walt: You see, kid? Now, that's how guys talk to one another.

Thao: They do?

Martin: What, you got shit in your ears?

Walt: Now go on out and come back in, and talk to him like a man. Like a real man.

Martin: Come on, Walt.

Walt: Come on. Get your ass out of here. And come on back now. [to Martin] Sorry about this.

Martin: It's okay.

Thao: What's up, you old Italian prick?

Martin: Get out of my shop before I blow your head off you goddamn dick-smoking gook!

Walt: Jesus Christ. Oh, shit. Take it easy. Take it easy. What the hell are you doing? Have you lost your mind?

Thao: But that's what you said. That's what you said men say.

Walt: You don't just come in and insult the man in his own shop. You just don't do that. What happens if you meet some stranger and get the wrong one? He's gonna blow your gook head right off.

Thao: What should I have said, then?

Martin: Yeah, kid, why don't you start with "Hi" or "Hello"?

Walt: Yeah, just come in and say, "Sir, I'd like a haircut, if you have time."

Martin: Yeah, be polite, but don't kiss ass.

Walt: In fact, you could talk about a construction job you just came from and bitch about your girlfriend and your car.

Martin: Um, son of a bitch, I just got my brakes fixed and those sons of bitches really nailed me. I mean, they screwed me right in the ass.

Walt: Yeah, don't swear at the guy. Just talk about people who are not in the room. You could bitch about your boss making you work overtime when it's bowling night.

Martin: Right, or my old lady bitches for two goddamn hours about how they don't take expired coupons at the grocery store and the minute I turn on the fucking game, she starts crying how we never talk.

Walt: You see? Now go out, come back and talk to him. And, it ain't rocket science for Christ sakes.

Thao: Yeah, but I don't have a job, a car or a girlfriend.

Martin: Jesus. I should've blown his head off when I had the chance.

Walt: Yeah, maybe so. Now, okay, I want you to turn around and go outside and come back, and don't talk about having no job, no car, no girlfriend, no future, no dick. Okay? Just turn around and go.

Thao walks out and comes back in.

Thao: Excuse me, sir. I need a haircut, if you ain't too busy. You old Italian son-of-a-bitch prick barber. Boy, does my ass hurt from all the guys at the construction job.

Martin laughs.

Walt: Fuck me. Jesus Christ.

## APPENDIX B: ENTRE LES MURS

### Appendix B1

Principal: "Carl tried to reason with him and stop him. Souleymane broke free, swinging his bag that hit Koumba in the face. Then he left, insulting everyone and slamming the door. I didn't go after him because I needed to help Koumba whose eyebrow was bleeding." Those are the facts that led to today's hearing. Madame, it doesn't mean Souleymane is a bad boy. That's not what we're saying. But, sometimes, a student in a class, through voluntary or involuntary behavior, can create an atmosphere that prevents the class from working and getting ahead.

(Souleymane translates)

Do you understand what we're saying?

Frederec: If I may say something, it's true that there had been a number of signs that should have warned us. We could have reacted sooner. But now we have to deal with an incident that is fairly violent and that's simply unacceptable. I'd like to know if you realize that, Souleymane?

Sophie: You see, we're not saying you're deliberately violent. The problem is you can't control what you say and what you do.

Principal: Souleymane, we'd like to hear you. You're here to express your point of view. Go ahead.

Souleymane: I don't give a damn. I've got nothing to say. Do whatever you want to do. His mother says something in Malian. She seems to be telling him off for his aggressive reaction to the teachers' accusations.

Principal: Excuse me... Souleymane's mother continues to speak in Malian.

Sophie: Can you translate?

Souleymane: She says I'm a good boy. I do my homework. I help my brothers and sisters with their work when I can. I always wash the dishes and help her when I can.

Principal: Madam, we don't doubt that Souleymane is a good son. That's not the problem. I'd like to get back to his school record.

Parent's Rep #1: Excuse me, but could we focus on the facts here? Firstly, I'd like to say that we're surprised to see the teacher involved in the incident on this committee. We find that highly irregular.

Burak's Mother: (another parents' rep) It's true. It's odd to be both judge and litigant.

Principal: First of all, Mr. Marin was elected to the administrative board as the teachers' representative. Moreover, I think that the incident that occurred in Mr. Marin's class doesn't involve the teacher directly.

Parents' Rep #1: I'm sorry, but you mention some harsh words spoken by the teacher.

Apparently, if I understand rightly, you used the word "skanks" to describe the class reps. And that's a problem.

Francois: I did say that but it wasn't something that concerned Souleymane. I think he used the excuse of a rather heated exchange with those two students to express the bad mood he was in that day.

Parents' Rep #1: He tried to defend them. So I feel that it's relevant. François, awkward, prefers not to reply while Frédéric, annoyed, answers for him.

Frederic: I'm sorry, but absolutely nothing justifies being disrespectful to a teacher, insulting everyone and leaving a class without permission.

Principal: Souleymane, do you have anything to say?

Souleymane: I don't know. What can I say?

Souleymane's Mother: Sir, madame...

She then continues in Malian.

Sophie: Souleymane?

Principal: What did your mother say?

Souleymane: The same thing as before. His mother says something else in Malian.

Principal: Yes, Souleymane?

Souleymane: She apologizes on my behalf.

INT. CORRIDOR - DAY

Souleymane and his mother sit down on a bench in the corridor. They don't speak or even look at each other.

INT. MEETING ROOM - DAY

In the meeting room, the vote is under way. Everyone taking part in the meeting drops a small piece of paper into a box that is passed around. Everyone is silent.

INT. CORRIDOR & MEETING ROOM - DAY

The year supervisor comes to fetch Souleymane and his mother who are still in the same position.

Julie: You can come back in now. They stand and follow her into the room. As soon as they sit down, the principal starts speaking.

Principal: Madame, the committee has conferred and has decided to expel Souleymane from the school for good. You will receive the ruling by registered mail and have eight days to appeal. We shall do our best to find Souleymane another school. Souleymane translates for his mother who stands and picks up her bag.

Souleymane's Mother: Goodbye, sir, madame...

Souleymane too stands and goes out with looking back as the principal continues to address him.

Principal: Souleymane, come to see me before the end of the week, please.

EXT. YARD - DAY

Souleymane and his mother cross the yard to the exit. From the window, François watches them go.

## Appendix C: YOUTH POETRY

### Appendix C1: Untitled by Hari

I speak with that South Van slang: migration intonation more lifestyle than regionale.  
My tone is the metronome that says I've been told to go back where I come from;  
Denied a job on sight and called D.P., Hindu & Paki interchangeable.  
When 3 or more of me show up we drop the value of your property  
And apparently reduce your high class establishment to savagery.  
Fuck. You.

My accent is that Carabao English: a rhythm spoken by millions of women placed in nanny positions but living and resisting and exhibiting strength against your demotion of her work and value of emotions. My echo is loud cuz I'm unseen, even though I'm exported to every port and then deported.  
Even though my labour is visible in your skyscrapers  
And even though I've done much more than change your parents' diapers.  
Fuck. You.

But I can expound more than anger. I can take back my power  
The importance of my broken sentence is home bringing consequence cuz change na be ours.  
Hindi sa aiyo. Meron is where I place the rason.  
Fuck. Me.

Why do I want to be you?  
Why do I rhyme my manhood the way you do?  
Why are so many of my inflections disrespectful?  
How many of me assumed a glance meant you can ask for my pants before she HAD to assume  
do you want to dance means I've got sexual plans?  
How do I mis-hear disinterest as an attack on what I've been trained to exclaim  
Is the essence of my maleness?  
Arre Va...Shabash!

And following that vocal exhale of insecurity,  
Can I really sound the belief that I am so sexy  
That in my straightness all queer men want to have me?  
That even the proximity of my masculinity's presence  
can make dick-lovers out of lesbians?  
Bull-Shit. Leche!

And some of me call my own communities lazy  
When I make it out of the gutter  
And shudder at the thought of even more me's crossing the borders  
And cheer for the same values I hold responsible for my abuse  
And refuse to listen to the realness of he's and she's and outsiders in between:  
Every time we silence gender and sexual languages  
We ARE the violence of our own suffering and ravages

So my work is at home and abroad.  
I've got to heal myself cuz you want to help me express my own defraud.  
Hay Naku!

And I'm still getting rooked so I'm calling you on your shit.  
And don't dare think you're off the hook  
Just because I'm striving to own up to mine.  
This is my accent and my rhythm is between the time.  
I am becoming more than you can define; and I always have been.  
I always have been.

\*rooked – 1)getting jacked or getting tricked or messing up in some way – I got rooked by the cops last night. I'm getting rooked by this measly paycheck. 2) Drunk or blazed or messed up – Did you see Hari at the house party? He was so rooked!

## **Appendix C2: Canadian Cancer by Saira Najarali**

Why do you look so strange?  
Why do you wear that on your head?  
Why do your clothes smell?  
My mom says we are all different...

You don't go trick-or-treating on Halloween?  
You don't celebrate Christmas?  
You don't know about the Easter Bunny?  
My mom says we celebrate different holidays...

Why don't you wear make-up?  
Why don't you date boys?  
Why don't you come to our parties?  
My mom says our traditions are different...

YOU are different,  
YOU don't belong,  
This is CANADA!  
"I AM DIFFERENT,  
I DON'T BELONG!"

"Being different is O.K." Mom says.  
BUT BEING DIFFERENT HURTS!!!

I want blonde hair,  
I want blue eyes,  
I was to shop at the GAP,  
I want the boys to like me,

I want the girls to like me,  
I WANT TO BELONG!

Bleach the hair,  
Insert the coloured contact lenses,  
Apply the first coat of make-up,  
The transformation has begun.

Next come the dangling earrings,  
The tight jeans,  
The designer sweater,  
The transformation becomes more real.

My first sip of alcohol,  
My first cigarette,  
My first sexual encounter,  
The transformation is working...I BELONG!

BUT where do I belong?

Yelling matches at home,  
Incessant arguing,  
Hurtful words,  
Deafened ears,  
Painful sobs,  
Slamming doors,  
My mother shakes me,  
“DON’T LOSE YOURSELF TO THIS!! WAKE UP!!!!”

My mother’s screaming is futile,  
She doesn’t understand...I belong.

I fit in,  
The girls like me,  
the boys like me.  
I go trick-or-treating,  
I decorate the Christmas tree,  
I hide the Easter eggs.  
I am a true Canadian now.

Years later, I sit at my mother’s hospital bedside,  
Tubes coming out of her from every direction,  
And then, that horrible sound that will ring in my ears until the end of time,  
The heart monitor reveals no pulse.

This time I shake her,  
“DON’T LOSE YOURSELF TO THIS!! WAKE UP!!!!!!”

But is it too late...  
My screaming is futile  
The cancer has overcome her,  
My mother is gone.

And so am I.  
My childhood innocence is gone forever,  
My identity has been stripped away,  
My own cancer has deprived me of the core of my existence,  
Canadian cancer has overcome me.

### **Appendix C3: My great aunt packed up all the things by Kenji Tokawa**

My great aunt packed up all the things from her house with my late great uncle to move down,  
downsizing in a hurry  
She had too many magazines and books to carry to the new house so she chose to dispose of the  
weight by spreading knowledge to a library who asked her:  
How many cartons of those books have you got now?  
To which she replied:  
I have no cartons. I only have rice bags. Seventeen rice bags full of books.

Now,

How Asian can you get?  
and how can i get there?

Because i

1. don't speak Japanese like my name tells you that i should and then i
2. was born in Brampton, to a
3. white mother and a
4. 3<sup>rd</sup> generation father who also
5. can't speak Japanese and if you ask him where he's from he'll tell you loftily,  
He's a Canadian and my
6. grandmother, whom I do still call Bachan, was born in a Vancouver house  
That is
7. according to my google search and estimation,  
8000 kilometres away from where it is i am from.

Over 8000 kilometres away from where it is i am not from.  
But instead am in a place where people every day, strangers on the street, on the  
Bus, in the line for a bagel ask me:  
Where are you from?  
What can a hapa say to satisfy such an insatiable question? Not the truth,  
So i try a lie:  
'I'm irish,'  
No, that doesn't work.

How about this,  
'I'm Japanese,'  
No, that doesn't work either.  
Wait, I've got it!  
I am you. Because like you, i only know what they tell me.  
And then i play my role to make it easy for you to label me.  
So that we can discuss geographies while looking at the shapes of each other's eyes  
suspiciously to see just what it is that you or me is lying to me or you about.

And when my great aunt tells me things like how Japanese women don't make  
noise when they give birth, and my grandmother seconds that motion of  
traditional truth all i can think of are the islands;  
how many islands Bachan? "Oh i don't know"  
writhing and growing in the ocean  
almost overflowing with little black topped straight haired babies inside their  
collective womb  
ready to pop  
gritting their teeth to bite the silence until a divine wind inspired tide pulls out the babies into the  
ocean  
across the dotted international date line,  
to these places to marry hakujins and bear hapa children  
who can look more Japanese if they only try on a pair of glasses  
or will at times seem like they have no culture at all, and then just to confuse you  
even more, will lock their hair.  
Which always bring you back to the same burning question:  
No really, where are you from?

i am from pangea  
i am from the ocean  
i am from the soil and the sun turning me darker like my gichan my grandfather  
from the east  
and i am from the west  
from between my mother's bloodied and placenta stained white legs  
and when she screamed it woke me up to the fact that wherever it is i am from  
i am here now, and there's no going back

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