Encounters with Counterstories: Reading the Past Critically with Non-Fiction Books for Young Adults

Introduction

While I was a high school English teacher for six years, I begin this article with an anecdote stemming from my experience as a white teaching assistant in a teacher education program at [Great Lakes University]1, a predominantly white institution in the Midwest. The anecdote provides a context for defining a key term for this paper: counterstories.

Following the presentation of a renowned Psychologist on the developmental stages of children in relation to the concepts of race and ethnicity, I asked students in my “Introduction to Education” discussion section, most of whom identified as white, to write down their own racial and ethnic backgrounds on the various whiteboards around the room. After this exercise, students in the group shared stories from their lives related to their racial awareness. More specifically, students recalled and shared times when they discovered they were white or they recalled being excluded from the category of whiteness because of their ethnicity, skin color, language, or other cultural factors.

I began the sharing of racial awareness with a brief story from my own childhood. At the time of this event, I was about five-years-old, on a shopping trip to K-Mart with my mother, older brother, and infant brother. As my mother struggled to get the infant out of the backseat, I called out into the parking lot, “There’s my mother!”

By the time my mother got her head out of the car, my “other mother” had disappeared into the store. Once in the store, however, I would again see “my mother” and announce it to my family (and others passing by). My biological mother was immobilized and nervously told me to stop pointing and to be quiet. The mother I had pointed to was a Black woman.

In this moment, I began to articulate an awareness of differences that are socially constructed: I was in the early stages of my racial and ethnic awareness. While my initial foray into the awareness can be seen as “skin deep,” I believe significant lessons about race, difference, and whiteness were learned through the experience. Based on my mother’s reaction alone, I learned something long-lasting about how race operates in the U.S. society. Throughout my childhood and into my adulthood, this story frequently surfaced and recirculated at various family gatherings as “Jim’s ‘other’ mother” story.

After the telling of my “racial awareness” story, other students in the class began revealing their own, similar observations as young people noticing race. Many of the tellings – like my own story – seemingly contained elements of humor that permitted/invited other whites to giggle or chuckle at some point during the story. This pattern was interrupted, however, when “Camyn” began to tell her story. As a third generation Korean American, Camyn, was the only student who identified as non-white in our discussion group of 17.

Camyn began by explaining that she grew up and attended early elementary school on the East coast of the U.S. She revealed that she had invited all 30 of the students in her first grade class to her birthday party celebration over the

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1 All names and institutions have been given pseudonyms.
weekend. When the day of the party arrived, however, only two students showed up to the party. Both of these students were “of color.”

At school the following week, Camyn learned that her white peers did not attend her party because she was “different” – she was “not white.” As Camyn shared this heartbreaking story, the tears in her eyes could not be restrained as she revealed (and relived) this traumatic experience in her life. There was no snickering after Camyn’s retelling, and her story sobered the group to the realities of race in the schoolyard (Lewis, 2003) and beyond.

I extend Camyn’s story here as an example of a “counterstory.” The counterstory is told as a counter to the “majoritarian” stories that generally privilege white, middle-upper class, heterosexual males as normative or natural reference points (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 28). In Camyn’s story, her identity as a Korean American female becomes the location through which others in the class experienced her tale. While the other tales about “race awareness” privileged whiteness, Camyn’s story de-centers the “standard,” master narrative and juxtaposes it with a story that threatens the comfort and privilege of whiteness as the norm.

Camyn’s awareness story can be considered a “meeting ground” for whites to listen firsthand to narratives that contextualize the power, benefits, and investments embedded in the racial category of whiteness.

In a time of unprecedented state, national, and global demographic and economic tumult, the journey into pursuing justice with students and teachers remains an unceasing enterprise. Given the fact that textbooks remain one of the most significant material factors that play into the teaching and learning in our nation’s schools, this essay will first explore the “politics of the text” to make the case that alternatives to textbooks must be integrated when possible. Specifically, this essay calls attention to the contested nature of dominant narratives as they appear in textbooks and other cultural products. Following a brief overview of the contested nature of textbooks in schools, I next call attention to the tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) that guide another layer for this paper, defining and extrapolating the concept of counterstorytelling by situating the term among recent examples of non-fiction books for young adults.

To provide a brief example of the difficulty of telling or knowing a determined story or narrative, I provide a sample question from Delgado (2000) who asks,

[Wh]at is the ‘correct’ answer to the question, The American Indians are – (A) a colonized people; (B) tragic victims of technological progress; (C) subjects of a suffocating, misdirected federal beneficence; (D) a minority stubbornly resistant to assimilation; or (E) ----------; or (F) ----------? (p. 61)

Such a question gets to the heart of the importance and awareness that multiple and frequently competing story lines exist, often in a simultaneous fashion. In classrooms firmly grounded in principles of democracy and critical literacy, it is the duty of literacy educators to help students view an author’s topic in alternate ways (Apple & Beane, 2007; Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002; Wallowitz, 2008; Luke & Woods, 2009; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). In this paper, I will explore the possibilities for implementing units of studies related to two contemporary examples of “counterstories” found in non-fiction books for young adults. A final aim for this paper will be to offer recommendations and practices for advancing students’ critical literacy skills through literary theories beyond Reader-Response (Rosenblatt, 1938/1995; Appleman, 2009).

**Guiding Questions**

The following questions guide this inquiry:

- What is the relationship between the study of history and literature through textbooks in the U.S.?
- What is a counterstory or counternarrative and how/in what ways do these oral and written accounts provide alternatives to traditional textbook renderings of historical events?
- What are some examples of counterstories in non-fiction books for young adults and how can these texts advance the basic tenets of critical literacies?

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2 My intention here is not to suggest that “white” is not a color. But in the U.S., whiteness has often been (mis)construed as a racial category that lacks color.
What is the Relationship Between the Study of History and Literature Through Textbooks?

I began my teaching career as an English teacher in a rural, working-class, predominantly white high school in [Great Lakes State] in the fall of 2001. My own upbringing as a white in a working-class, mostly white city in [a state bordering Great Lakes] allowed for a general sense of coziness about this teaching position. For six years, I taught, three sections a day, a course required by all juniors in the school: English 11 or American Literature. The teacher I succeeded had kindly left behind a brand new set of American Literature textbooks (McDougal Littell, 2000). These thousand-plus page textbooks arrived to my new classroom in a scene reminiscent of Christmas-in-July. I remember feeling a range of emotions at the spectacle of boxes and heavy books. At times, I felt enchanted with this first set of teaching materials. Concurrently, I felt a general feeling of being overwhelmed, particularly as I handled the internally persuasive “Teacher’s Edition” of the textbook.

Textbooks still evoke emotions in my being. Having been introduced to the “market forces” that significantly influenced the textbook publishing industry (Delfattore, 1991) as a graduate student at [Great Lakes University], I distinctly recall my bewilderment after learning about the influence of Texas Christian conservatives Mel and Norma Gabler and their organization, Educational Researchers Analysts, on the textbook industry. The Gablers’ insistence in presenting a unified body of American Literature stood in opposition to my conception of a more encompassing “American Literatures” (Rodriguez, 2011) that I was prepared to direct attention toward.

As I re-read my teaching of American Literature with a critical lens, the bias and sway of the Gabler’s (among other ultra-conservative groups) permeated the book from its “patriotic” tone and patriarchal text selection(s) down to the highly edited and omitted nature of the contributions of women, free-thinkers, peoples of color, and other oppressed or marginalized groups (e.g., gays and lesbians, non-Christians, “anti-capitalists,” workers, etc.). This introduction to the “politics of the textbook” (Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991) and the “politics of historical representation” (Wills, 1994, 1996) has continually forced me to reflect upon my own past and future teaching with a more critical perspective.

Apple (1988) has correctly pointed out that “school knowledge has some (admittedly complex) connections to the larger political economy” (p. 85). It is within this economy, however, that we consistently find pre-service teachers, teachers, and teacher educators unaware of the historical and contemporary legacies related to the decentralized textbook industry and its influence on curricular organization and content. According to Apple (1988), estimates suggest “that 75 percent of the time elementary and secondary students are in the classrooms and 90 percent of their time on homework is spent with text materials” (p. 85).

In other words, the textbook establishes the “material conditions for teaching and learning” in the United States, but also “throughout the world” (Apple, 1988, p. 81). As an unfortunate result, we find that the textbook plays a significant role in defining and determining “what is elite and legitimate culture to pass on” (ibid.) to future generations.

Furthermore, as Apple (1993a) writes, “the decision to define some groups’ knowledge as the most legitimate, as official knowledge, while other groups’ knowledge hardly sees the light of day, says something extremely important about who has power in society” (p. 222). While some groups become empowered through their portrayal in the “high status knowledge,” other groups become disempowered, disenfranchised, and marginalized in curricular materials, in classrooms, and even in communities. That is, we often hear the voices and see the images of those from the dominant cultural group, while silence and omission surrounds groups who have been historically and systematically “disadvantaged.”

Sleeter and Grant (1991) have argued that through the “selective” nature of ideas and information in textbooks, unequal relationships, which are socially-constructed, often remain hidden in textbooks through their particular

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3 As Apple (1996) has argued, “words do count,” including the construction of “disadvantaged” and the implication embedded in the notion that “one’s problems are largely the result of bad luck” as if “there are no agents of domination” (p. 17).
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images and storylines (Brown & Brown, 2010; Buras, 2008). For instance, Sleeter and Grant (1991) make the case that “the history of White racism and oppression is muted, and complexities within groups or involving interaction among groups is virtually ignored” (p. 81). The resulting storyline presented in many textbooks, then, designates whites as able-bodied peoples at the center of attention – this at the expense of ignoring the contributions and roles of groups that have been historically marginalized. As well, marginalized groups’ struggles only come into focus when it is convenient for whites to place such groups into their narrowly delegated events or time periods (Sleeter & Grant, 1991; Wills, 1996), so long as these contributions do not disrupt the dominant narrative in U.S. history: the story line and celebration of progress and expansion (e.g., overcoming slavery, attaining civil rights, the transcontinental railroad) (Wills, 1994).

It is important to remember that racial and ethnic groups have remained incidental to the dominant narrative of U.S. history. In addition to erasures, inaccuracies, and intentional misrenderings, Wills (1994) notes that textbooks are “fraught with biases” in the representation of African Americans, Native Americans, Mexican Americans, Asian Americans, Jews, and Muslims. We note, here, however, Wills’ prescient reminder that while textbook analyses provide important information about what is “in” the text, “it is the teacher, and not the textbook, who has the authoritative voice. It is the teacher who notes or ignores textbook information as he or she constructs a meaningful historical narrative” (p. 289). In other words, learning is the result of a social and cultural process, an interaction between texts and their readers and not merely a simple transmission from text to reader.

This stance reflects Apple's (1990) argument that textbook knowledge is not neutral, “but reflects the ideological biases of dominant groups [including] the biases and assumption of mainstream, White American culture” (in Wills, 1994, pp. 290-291). As a result, “[e]xposing students to multiple narratives can teach them about the contested nature of American history and enable them to challenge the cultural stereotypes of different racial and ethnic groups” (Wills, 1994, p. 292). Taking into consideration the “selective tradition” (Williams, 1961) inherent in knowledge construction, we are reminded of the usefulness of thinking about history “as a resource that is both enabling and constraining for students as citizens” (Wills, 1996, p. 386).

Apple and Beane (2007) provide a reminder that in a democratic society, “no one individual or interest group can claim sole ownership of possible knowledge and meaning” (p. 17). In addition to seeking change in the content we offer to students, pedagogically, those who professionally develop teachers must disrupt the tendency to perpetuate the notion that knowledge is the result of a passive transmission of “impartial” or “dispassionate” knowledge from the teacher to the student. In a truly democratic, participatory curriculum, teachers help students to understand that knowledge is a social construction, disseminated and produced by human beings with certain interests, biases, and values (Apple & Beane, 2007, p. 15; Apple 1993b, 2000). Given these circumstances, we must imagine a literacy curriculum that encourages students to be active meaning makers, rather than passive consumers of knowledge.

In addition to making meaning, breaking codes, and using text for something, McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) advocate that teachers help students embrace the role of critiquing the text. The real world, McLaughlin and DeVoogd maintain, is brimming with multiple and frequently competing perspectives. It is the duty of literacy educators to help students view an author’s topic in alternate ways. For a concrete example of how to begin the process of envisioning alternate ways of seeing things, we turn to the framework of Critical Race Theory as a guide for helping us to make meaning of other terms important in this piece.

What is a Counterstory or Counternarrative? How Do Counterstories Provide Alternatives to Traditional Renderings of Events?

Critical Race Theory
Critical Race Theory (CRT) can be defined as a “multidisciplinary epistemology typically situated within legal studies that places race at the center of analysis (Bell 1995)” (Brooks, 2009, p. 37). CRT has evolved and continues to evolve within an educational community “as a tool that
enables researchers to examine the role that race plays in a variety of school related phenomena such as school funding, curriculum, teacher expectations, ability grouping, and so forth (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn & Adams, 2002)” (Brooks, 2009, p. 37). Principally speaking, CRT is a way of thinking about teachers and texts in a context in which race is a central organizing principle.

Wanda Brooks (2009) has used tenets of CRT to call attention to the devaluation and exclusion of children’s literature written by people of color from the traditional Western canon. Brownyn T. Williams’ (2004) exploration of CRT and the counterstory in a literature and composition course helped students to confront the ways in which race structures the kinds of interactions we have the assumptions we often make. Williams’ (2004) students “explore race in a work where race seems invisible” (p. 167). For instance, Williams has students rewrite a scene in a way that features race more prominently using a story by John Cheever (1962), “The Reunion.” The story is set in a New York and tells of a boy visiting his alienated father. The two dine for lunch at an upscale Manhattan restaurant where the father becomes inebriated and is eventually asked to vacate from the premises. While race is never mentioned in the story, it is generally assumed that the characters are white and upper middle class. As students rewrite scenes from the restaurant using a father and son “of color,” the presence of race is expressively revealed, and the direction the story takes is markedly different (e.g., the tone of the restaurant manager is less polite, police are called to the scene, arrests are made, etc.). Through an exercise such as this one, students gain insight into the ways in which race, “not just individual behavior, structures our social interactions and assumptions” (Williams, 2004, p. 168). In the next section, I will explore a few tenets of Critical Race Theory before turning to the concept of counterstories as an outgrowth of CRT.

Tenets of Critical Race Theory

A number of tenets have been articulated as significant to the encompassing of CRT. I will narrow the scope to three tenets useful to this discussion as it relates to the counterstories in non-fiction books for young adults I will explore later in this piece. Ladson-Billings (2000; 2004) and Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), along with others (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997, 2000; Delgado, 2000), have referred to a number of propositions central to CRT. I will limit discussion to the following positions:

1. Racism is a normative aspect, a “permanent fixture” to life in America (Bell, 1992; Solórzano & Yosso, 2009; Delgado, 2000)

2. CRT disrupts institutional claims “toward objectivity, meritocracy, colorblindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity.” That is, scholars of CRT contend that such claims “act as a camouflage for the self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups in U.S. society (Calmore, 1992; Solórzano, 1997)” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26).

3. CRT offers a commitment to social justice of oppression in all forms (racial, gender, class oppression, sexual orientation) (Matsuda, 1991). Accordingly, the use of first-person stories and counterstories from marginalized others can be seen as a form of resistance to racial hegemony and oppression in other forms (sexism, heteronormativity, able-ism, classism, etc.). In CRT, “… multiple layers of oppression and discrimination are met with multiple forms of resistance” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26).

For this paper, I will expand upon the above propositions – the “normalized” aspect of racism and oppression society, the need to disrupt the privilege of dominant groups by interrogating the self-serving claims of “meritocracy” and “equal opportunity,” and the use of counterstories as a tool for challenging racialized and other forms of oppression.

The first tenet calls attention to the institutionalized nature of racism, linguistics, classism, and other forms of oppression. Ladson-Billings (2000) writes that because racism and oppression “is so enmeshed in the fabric of the U.S. social order, it appears both normal and natural to people in this society” (p. 264). As a “permanent fixture” of life in America, CRT scholars and those who fight for racial and social justice must “unmask and expose racism in all of its permutations”
(Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 264). According to Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), “[a] factor contributing to the demoralization of marginalized groups is self-condemnation” (p. 57). That is, members of marginalized or minoritized groups may internalize the stereotypes that have been imposed upon them through the hegemonic maintenance of power and privilege. Because oppression has been rationalized, the oppressor is frequently able to avoid self-examination for the conditions in which oppressed groups are structurally subjected. By calling attention to the normal, not aberrant, features of racism and oppression, CRT helps us to see oppression as “deeply ingrained legally, culturally, and even psychologically” (Tate, 1997, p. 234; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 52).

Despite the perpetuation of a belief in the adage about “pulling yourself up by your bootstraps,” Critical Race Theorists aim to complicate the notion of meritocracy as an ideology that contributes to already-existing inequities. The second tenet of CRT guiding my analysis relates to addressing institutional inequities and sleights-of-hand that lead to the maintenance of a tiered society. Claims of colorblindness, assertions on the neutrality of race, and declarations of “equal opportunity” merely serve the needs of a dominant class that uses such distractions to divert attention away from real issues of privilege and power among dominant groups in society. By troubling the notion of meritocracy, CRT is a framework that welcomes non-dominant storylines into the existing story of race in the United States. That is, CRT helps us in calling attention to and reckoning with the power and privileges that accompany whiteness.

The third tenet, a commitment to social justice and the use of oral and written counterstories as a form of resistance against hegemonic forces, relates to Ladson-Billings & Tate’s (1995) contention that, storytelling has historically “been a kind of medicine to heal the wounds of pain caused by racial oppression” (p. 57). Through story, individuals and groups who have been traditionally marginalized learn about the conditions that have and continue to contribute to subjugation and oppression.

While counterstories serve a number of functions, I emphasize the importance of counterstories in relation to building community, challenging commonly held beliefs (Solórzano & Yosso, 2009), and altering individual perspectives about self-worth and moral dignity (Nelson, 2001, p. 7). I provide a more nuanced account of the concept of counterstorytelling in the next section.

**Counterstories Defined**

The counterstory is a story told from the perspective of a person who or a group that has been marginalized. The story becomes “a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32). As such, counterstories can disrupt dysconscious racism (King, 1991; 2004). That is, counterstories have the potential to disrupt “uncritical habit[s] of mind” or what Joyce King (1991) has coined “dysconsciousness” (p. 135).

Additionally, counterstories help to build community at the margins. They also put a human face to the theory and practice associated with education. Counterstories also work to challenge the perceived wisdom of those at the center in a society and provide a context for examining and transforming belief systems. They also carry with them the potential to strengthen traditions of sociopolitical and cultural resistance and survival (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). As a pedagogical tool, counterstories teach ways to expose and challenge dominance at the same time they work to build a new reality.

The aim of the counterstory, in many ways, is to alter the perceptions of both the tellers and the listeners. Nelson (2001) writes that “[o]ppression often infiltrates a person’s consciousness, so that she comes to operate, from her own point of view, as her oppressors want her to, rating herself as they rate her” (p. 7). The counterstory, then, serves to infiltrate one’s consciousness in such a way as to alter self-understanding. Seeing one’s own moral worth can lead to an exercise in agency that resists or at least undermines acquiescing to the dominant, oppressive valuation. The counterstory takes a story that up until now has been “determined” and reconfigures or reorients it with new implications.

But why should in-group members listen to stories from the out-group? Delgado (1989) suggests that such listening enriches the ongoing construction of reality on the part of the listener.
Since reality is constructed in conversation with others, counterstories provide an opportunity for a member of an in-group to learn from the lives and stories of members in various out-groups. Overcoming the lack of conversations between members of varying and diverse groups is no small feat, however. Counterstories provide the ideal site for permitting these opportunities for enrichment to occur.

Now, it is important to recognize that the counterstory is not intended to replace the “majoritarian” or master narrative. Further, it is important not to assume that a person speaking from a marginalized space is automatically telling a counterstory (Freitag, 2011). Finally, it would be illusory to suggest that counterstories serve as an elixir to solve inequities fabricated around race, ethnicity, gender, and class.

Given these caveats, counterstories are a form of resistance that must be seen not as the answer, but rather as one of many answers. Determining the success of a counterstory, however, is no easy task. There is no magic chart or formula that can aid one to tell such a tale. While we may not be able to accurately determine the effect of any given story, counterstories contribute to “expand[ing] the empathetic range” of the listening audience(s) (Delgado, 2000, p. 70). Expanding the range of empathy in listeners is a worthy goal, but is by no means a guaranteed outcome.

It is my contention that counterstories can play a powerful role in literacy classrooms where issues of identity, social class, race, ethnicity, and categories of difference are taken into consideration. There are risks, however, that literacy educators face when bringing in stories about individuals and marginalized groups into the classroom. In other words, literacy educators must not fall into the trap of valorizing the “unique individual” while neglecting a critique of injustices at the institutional and structural levels.

Lastly, counterstories and critical literacies move teachers and students beyond the reader-response approach to responding to literature (Appleman, 2009; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). While efferent/aesthetic stances on Rosenblatt’s continuum (Rosenblatt, 2004) have supported practices and pedagogy in literacy-rich classrooms, the critical stance in conjunction with an emphasis on the counterstory can be seen as important in terms of promoting thoughtful interactions between readers and writers. In helping to make the quotidian world problematic, counterstories as a dimension of CRT and critical literacy also provide students with tools to “rewrite those worlds when possible and necessary” (Michell, 2006, p. 44).

I now turn to contemporary non-fiction books for young adults that serve as starting points for introducing the counterstory in classrooms where students are encouraged to see the multiplicity of perspectives on particular issues. Situating alternative counterstories that speak back to and resist traditional, dominant renderings of historical events, I will make clear, is an exercise in critical literacy that allows for students to actively make meaning of texts.

What are Examples of Counterstories in Non-Fiction Books for Young Adults?

**Denied, Detained, Deported**

Ann Bausum’s (2009) Denied, Detained, Deported: Stories from the Dark Side of Immigration, speaks to the complexities of immigration and the United States, the land of immigrants. Specifically, Bausum’s book calls attention to the U.S. proclamation as a home for the “tempest-tost” and “huddled masses” of other nations by contrasting this motto to some of the nation’s historical immigration policies that have actually limited or restricted various peoples from pursuing the “American Dream.” The book consists of five chapters, each chapter depicting an instance of immigration policy gone awry. In her introductory chapter, Bausum offers that her non-fiction case studies collectively “offer counterweight to the larger and better-known narrative of our nation’s more positive immigration history” (p. 10).

At a time in our nation’s history when the issue of immigration continues to make headlines daily and is complexly depicted in Young Adult Literature (Boatright, 2010; Yang, 2006), Bausum’s book provides literacy educators with an important starting point for exploring with adolescent students in the classroom the forces of fear, national security, prejudice, racism, linguistics, economics, and patriotism that have given shape to (and continue to shape) the nation’s immigration history. The book serves as a valuable resource for scrutinizing recent policies, including the
Homeland Security Act and the decade-old PATRIOT Act. Such policies, often under the guise of “counter-terrorism,” have led to greater surveillance of those who have been deemed as the suspicious (read: non-white, non-Christian) “Other.” Furthermore, we live in an era in that has seen bilingual education and ethnic studies banned and demonized as “dangerous,” “un-American,” and against “classic American values” (Palos, 2011; Biggers, 2012). Immigration laws such as Arizona’s (SB 1070) and Alabama’s (HB 56) demand the attention of thoughtful literacy educators who create space in their classrooms for ruminative and thick deliberation on these and other complex topics with students.

After a provocative introduction in which we are made aware of the historical and contemporary focus for the book, Bausum details in each chapter the story lines of immigration that are often left on the cutting floor when it comes to traditional textbook accounts of immigration in the U.S. By “details,” I mean to call attention to complimentary lines developed in this digestible work. On one hand, this book has a photo-essay quality that stands alone narratively with its illustrations and period photographs. On the other hand, the book has been meticulously researched and offers readers with compelling narrative accounts. As one of many possible texts for teaching about immigration, literacy teachers will find this one useful. As a companion to this book, I offer Joanne Oppenheim’s (2004) Dear Miss Breed: True stories of the Japanese American incarceration during World War II and a librarian who made a difference. Additionally, I suggest Shaun Tan’s (2007) wordless picturebook, The Arrival. Tan’s book is also by no means extensive, but it is a text worthy of critical attention in its portrayal of immigrants in relationship to the dominant narrative of immigrants as white, European, hard-working, and successful with assimilation (e.g. learning the language, finding meaningful work, etc.).

Denied, Detained, Deported clearly offers a number of alternatives to the dominant storyline of (the mythical) “ideal immigrants” offered in many textbook renditions on the topic. The book serves as a point of entry for entering into and engaging in the multi-accented dialogue of immigration in the United States. In addition to providing counter-stories to the pursuit of the American Dream, the book also leaves readers with questions that require further investigation: Whose perspectives are shared in these stories? Whose stories are missing? Whose story/ies of immigration is/are silenced or disregarded as less desirable in the text? Such questions yield opportunities for students to search for deeper historical understandings that challenge authorial presentations.

Almost Astronauts: The “Mercury 13”

For too long, the narrative the “astronaut-as-hero” has catered to the privileging of white, middle-class, male. The dominant narrative can be historically situated in terms of its longevity with a quick glance through an assortment of classroom textbooks that exclude and overlook the contributions and opinions of those who experienced the space race from differing embodied and engendered perspectives. Textbooks are not the only source for a continuation of the marginalizing narrative, as even some of the recent literature published to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the 1969 moon-landing perpetuate the myth of space exploration as a unifying, all-white, male experience.

Tanya Lee Stone’s (2009) Almost Astronauts: 13 Women Who Dared to Dream, is an assemblage of compelling, behind-the-scenes storytelling, powerful photographic images, and complex historical actors and primary documents. Stone narrates this nonfictional account of the 13 female pilots who were “almost astronauts” with a delicate balance of wit, humor, turbulence, and truth with digestible chapters that will keep any reader turning the pages of this must read. As Peters’ (2009) has argued, this book is a “passionately written ... little-known challenge to established gender prejudices” (pp. 169-170). The book, a well-documented collection of recently unearthed documents and first-hand interviews with surviving members, lends itself well to a critical exploration of gender bias in its “historical” form.

The book predominantly features the experience of Jerrie Cobb, a white twenty-eight-year-old experienced pilot who had logged “far more than John Glenn’s 5,000 hours [in the air]” (Stone, 2009, p. 14). By February of 1960, Cobb became “the first” of many “firsts” in the line of women waiting for their chance to break
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through real and imagined boundaries. Cobb became “[t]he first to have freezing water injected into her ears ... [freezing] the inner ear bone, which induces vertigo ... To drink radioactive water ... In secret, she was the first woman to take all eighty-seven of the physical tests the Mercury 7 had taken” (Stone, pp. 17-18).

Furthermore, Cobb was the first woman to pass such rigorous testing, and she did so, so claim the doctors, “with fewer complaints than the guys” (p. 18). When testing results were announced publicly around late August in 1960, a frenzy ensued. Many, in an age when no man had even been to the moon, were “caught off guard” by the announcement. Headlines in newspapers and editorials would not mince words: “Astronaughty,” “Moon Maid,” “Astronette,” “Astrodoll,” “Space Gal.” Even the folks at NASA distanced themselves from the researcher’s independent testing. The organization maintained a public sentiment that sending a woman into space was not “in the foreseeable future” (Stone, 2011, p. 20). Remember, at this time, researchers and scientists had concluded that the menstrual cycle affected the brain’s reasoning, discernment, and judgment and made women unfit for space travel (Stone, 2011, p. 84).

The research effectively debunked the myth that women were “the weaker sex” at the same time it dismissed the notion that women were not suitable subjects for space exploration (Stone, 2011, p. 43). Of particular significance to our study of critical literacy in this work includes the exploration of the representation of these aspiring astronauts in popular media such as Life, Parade, McCall’s, and other primary documents that are included in the book’s appendix. A focus on the details and the dates of various published works could certainly illuminate an assortment of the contradictions and complexities assembled into this story.

According to Stone (2011), “The race for space was always as much about politics as it was about science” (p. 56). An examination of the book’s contents for some clues for piecing together the social and political contexts which Jerrie Cobb and others were up against will include and foster students working hands on with primary documents, including newspaper cartoons, editorials, telegrams, and classified files. While President John F. Kennedy does have a minor role in Stone’s book, it is the politics of Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, and in particular in this book, his handwriting on a previously hidden file, that will shock readers. Specifically, LBJ called for an end of all attempts to put women in space for fear that such an exercise would only lead to other marginalized groups seeking space exploration. On one occasion, LBJ told Cobb, “if we let you or other women into the space program, we’d have to let blacks in. We’d have to let Mexican Americans in, and Chinese Americans. We’d have to let every minority in, and we just can’t do it” (Stone, 2009, p. 63). Like all humans, Johnson was full of complexities. As Stone reminds us, despite his stance on women’s (and “others”’) role(s) in space exploration, Johnson is well-known for his historical signing of affirmative action legislation.

As the book brings to a close, readers are likely to stew over the actions, statements, and maneuverings of an assortment of committees, organizations, men, and women, that would effectively disable the advancements being made on the part of women’s rights. The Catch-22 of the astronaut requirement to have been a “jet-pilot” (women were not allowed to be jet-pilots at the time) is just one of the issues that I presume students will be interested in inquiring into further.

A study of Almost Astronauts promises to provide readers with a perspective on the gains that have been made by people who have willingly engaged in collective struggle in the direction of progress, albeit at a seemingly sluggish pace. Indeed, as a wise person once stated, the Grand Canyon is merely the result of a little bit of pressured applied over a really long time.

**Conclusion: How can Non-Fiction Books for Young Adults Advance the Basic Tenets of Critical Literacies?**

As discussed, the counterstory exists in non-fiction books for young adults. I have suggested that literacy educators must look outside of the traditional textbook accounts of historical events in order to present a more robust account of the past. This re-writing of the past is made possible through our engagement with the important concept of the counterstory. We have looked at the counterstory as an outgrowth of Critical Race Theory. CRT is grounded in the presumption
that stories offer a form of resistance to oppression in all forms. Among other kinds of storytelling (chronicles, revisionist histories, poetry, parables, and fiction), counterstories are a central feature of CRT. Such stories confront, rebut, and reorient oppression and discrimination in all its forms.

Along with CRT and the counterstory, I have attempted to call attention to the concept of counterstorytelling as a crucial component of the critical literacies project. Both counterstories and critical literacy fall under the big tent of equitable education in their association with teaching for social justice (Nieto & Bode, 2008). Indeed, critical literacy is not a separate project nor distinct from Critical Race Theory or other movements in education whose mission is to challenge hegemony, to “critique and question ... rather than accept and absorb” the dominant narrative (White, 2009, p. 56). Inherent in the tenets of critical literacy is an overarching commitment to addressing injustices and raising students’ social consciousness through action (Wood, Soares, & Watson, 2006).

An important model for deploying critical literacy in the classroom informing this project is the “Four Dimensions” model as described by Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys (2002). Like the resource model (Freebody & Luke, 1990), the dimensions of the model are not meant to be stand alone categories, but rather, the categories must be seen as interrelated. The dimensions model requires text viewers to do the following: (1) disrupt the familiar and commonplace routines in text, (2) interrogate texts from a stance that seeks to understand multiple perspectives, (3) focus on the sociopolitical issues in texts (or absent from them), and (4) take action to promote social justice. In their study of novice and newcomer teachers to critical literacy, Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys (2002) found teachers eager to gain “an understanding of sociopolitical systems, power relationships, and counternarratives to both historical and current events” (p. 391).

In its attempt to use literacy to achieve social justice, critical literacy has been noted for its interrogation of “texts” including canonical literature (Appleman, 2009), popular culture and contemporary media (Dyson, 2001; 1997; Bigelow, 2001; McDaniel, 2006), advertising (Wood, Soares, & Watson, 2006), music (Author, 2010), and social issues (immigration, homelessness, gender equity, GLBTQ rights) in texts for young adults (Ciardello, 2004; Boatright, 2010), with a general focus of investigating power and its embeddedness in the language of such texts (Rogers, 2002).

Critical literacy scholar Allan Luke (2000) has suggested that there is a blending of theories informing critical literacy. At times, these theories are “discordant” with one another. As such, critical literacy can be viewed as an outgrowth of multiculturalism in education (Banks, 1993; Grant & Sleeter, 2007) that is in close alignment with the basic tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy: believing in students’ academic success, developing cultural competence, and refining a sociopolitical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 2009; 1995). Like any curriculum, a critical literacy curriculum cannot claim political neutrality in its approach to teaching and learning (Shor, 1992). It is important to note that critical literacy is not a static body of techniques or strategies, but rather, a philosophical and decidedly political approach that advocates the “reading between the lines and the pages” (Ladson-Billings, 2010, p. 229).

At the heart of critical literacy is a cyclical process of examining complex issues such as power through reading, writing, reflection, and other actions (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). Key features of critical literacies include its dynamicism, adaptability, and emphasis on the local conditions in which it is practiced (Comber, 2001; Boatright, 2010; Rogers, 2002). In terms of practices, it is counterproductive to think about critical literacy as an accumulation of concrete and specific skills with a repertoire of classic readings and exercises. That being said, critical literacies can be generally understood to promote question-raising, searching for alternative (counter)narratives, juxtapositioning of texts, challenging/critiquing the authorial view, searching for silences and a deeper historical understanding of any given text (Boatright, 2010; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004; Luke 2000). According to Luke (2000), the approach should allow for “critical perspective taking” that develops “languages for talking about language” (p. 4). Rather than accepting or receiving the “grand narrative” or prevailing wisdom, a critical literacies approach works to analyze the role of language in maintaining dominance (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002).
As students utilize critical questions in a concentrated effort to dismantle the dominant narratives existing in our society as one of the heroic, white, middle-class males achieving the “American Dream,” the concept of the counterstory offers potential as one tool that may guide our future teaching. Alongside our students, we can make the necessary fissures in this and similar narratives, by opening windows and holding up mirrors through which students can explore their own identity/ies (Style, 1996).

As literacy educators, we play an important role in allowing our students to access and assemble various possibilities for who they may become. An important task for us to engage in, then, includes helping our students to critique predominant narratives that exist in our society, to the exclusion of “others” based on their race, class, gender, ability, sexual orientation, etc. As many critical theorists have articulated, teaching is inherently a political act. Instead of promoting narratives and materials that we proffer as “neutral,” I encourage educators to take a stand by creating opportunities for students to experience multiple perspectives on school topics. Denied, Detained, and Deported and Almost Astronauts are two texts that can help us with such a cause. By examining counterstories represented in contemporary non-fiction books for young adults, literacy educators provide snapshots into understandings of power relationships that need to be further investigated and disrupted. As well, such tools allow for worlds to be rewritten.

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Encounters with Counterstories: Reading the Past Critically with Non-Fiction Books for Young Adults

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