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Critical Discussions:

Using Satrapi's *Persepolis* with High School Language Arts Students

Literature has the power to engage adolescent readers in other worlds, identities, and cultures. Quality and complex literature can be a base to ask critical questions, challenge social norms, and be part of genuine dialogue. This research study stems from an interest in graphic novels as quality and complex texts and their ability to encourage discussion around complicated topics. As multimodal, yet strongly visual narratives, graphic novels have the ability to tell stories and reach readers in ways different from other media. For educators seeking to engage deeply in critical discussions that challenge social norms and hegemonic discourse around cultural and gender identities, graphic novels such as *Persepolis* (Satrapi, 2003) can serve as a resource.

We entered into this study asking: *In a high school language arts classroom, how does reading and studying the graphic novel* Persepolis *contribute to readers' views of gender?* Working with ten diverse high school students in a small reading group, we observed discussions of *Persepolis*. These students came to this unit with varying reading levels, interests, and abilities. Further, it was an ethnically diverse group, with one particular student (Dee; student names are pseudonyms) who identified as American and Palestinian. She related to the text not ethnically, but as a Muslim female. These diverse perspectives directly affected how students read and discussed the text.

We selected the text *Persepolis* for a number of reasons. First, it stands on its own and is regarded by many as a piece of quality literature for classroom use (Connors, 2007; Harris, 2007; Schwarz, 2007; Versaci, 2008; White, 2010). Also, the content of *Persepolis* involves themes around gender roles and gender performance complicated by cultural expectations. We wondered if this graphic novel would allow for critical discussions not only because of its complex content, but also its graphic novel form. We found that drawing on this kind of critical, multimodal text shaped an environment conducive to critical dialogue, extending possibilities for addressing and altering negative discourses.

Review of Literature

Scholarship has recognized a wide variety of adolescent literature that helps explore ideas of identity through critical discussion. Here we explore research around graphic novels specifically, as well as theory and practice regarding the use of literature to inform discussions of identities and as tools for critical discussions.

The Graphic Novel

The use of multimodal texts such as graphic novels to engage students in critical discussions is a topic that has gone unexamined until recently. The graphic novel is a medium of literature that is gaining legitimacy and value in an academic setting (Carter, 2007; Frey & Fisher, 2008; McCloud, 1993). Chute (2008, 2010) notes her interest in graphic narratives because of what they do differently. Focusing on Satrapi's *Persepolis*, she writes, "[W]hile its content is keenly feminist . . . we may understand the text as modeling

a feminist methodology *in its form*, in the complex visual dimension of its author's narrating herself on the page as a multiple subject" (2008, p. 94). The text's form provides a space for the reader *and* the author to witness to Satrapi's history; Satrapi is literally making what has been hidden visible (Chute, 2008).

The graphic novel medium, because of its form, also creates opportunities for reading and discussion that are unique from other media. Along with reading images and words, this medium is arranged in panels and gutters, providing physical and intellectual space to make meaning and connections with the narrative (McCloud, 1993). Scholarship also argues that the dynamic and complex nature of these kinds of texts brings welcomed challenges to readers, as well as provides a supportive reading experience to struggling readers (Carter, 2007, Connors, 2013). Connors's empirical work with graphic novels (including *Persepolis)* and adolescent readers suggests reading these multimodal texts requires a "wealth of resources" to decode, analyze, and make meaning—skills that are often underestimated (2013, p. 48). His participants relied on both visual and textual content clues to talk about the texts. As Connors and others (McCloud, 1993) have suggested, we have found that reading graphic novels is not a passive process but one that is active and complex. Navigating textual and visual modes contributes to this process. Bringing graphic novels into an academic setting promises opportunities for meaning making and encourages dynamic discourse.

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Literature as a Way to Explore Cultural and Gender Identities

Literature has the potential to engage readers in identities—both their own and others. This research is informed by Sims Bishop's (1990) theories of literature as both windows and mirrors for adolescent readers, allowing them to see a world other than their own in a text, while still making personal connections to it. Using texts with characters that are not reflective of the dominant sociocultural audience also affords minority readers experiences that can become "means of self-affirmation" (Sims Bishop, para. 1). It also makes space for non-minority students to learn and experience different ways of being.

Gender is often explored in scholarship related to adolescent literature and readers. Using literature in a classroom is a significant way for teachers and researchers to explore gender issues (Ma'ayan, 2012; Orellana, 1995; Rice, 2002). Our research is also informed by Connell (2009), who argues that gender is not a "fixed dichotomy" (p. 10), but rather is socially constructed and continuously changing and evolving. Further, individuals can challenge or trouble the binary categories of gender through their own performance (Butler, 2006). Texts like *Persepolis* challenge gender norms (Chute, 2008, 2010; White, 2010), thus demonstrating that literature can be a resource that both encourages discussions around gender stereotypes and binaries and offers examples of how gender can be performed differently.

Critical Discussions

By starting critical conversations in the classroom early (Deprez, 2010), commonly held stereotypes have the potential to be addressed and altered. Critical literacy contributes to this analysis with its emphasis on interrogating oppression. Morrell (2008) writes, "Critical literacy… is necessary not only for the critical navigation of hegemonic discourse; it is also essential to the redefining of the self and the transformation of oppressive social structures and relations of production" (p. 5). Critical literacy and subsequent dialogue also allows readers to dissect how a text can "work to create transformation in the world" (Ma'ayan, p. 18, 2012). This dialogue can provide opportunities for students and teachers to personally connect with the literature and each other, and can ultimately serves as a starting point for "new way[s] of thinking" (Deprez, 2010, p. 481).

Persepolis as a critical text

Graphic novels, apart from the value of multimodal resources in the classroom (Kress, 2003), provide unique and engaging reading experiences (Dallacqua, 2012a, 2012b) that can bolster critical dialogue (Lamen, Jewett, Jennings, Wilson, & Souto-Manning, 2012) that stems from critical literacy. The graphic

novel *Persepolis* is a critical text that lends itself to critical dialogue around gender and culture in high school language arts classrooms (Connors, 2007, 2013; Harris, 2007; Schwarz, 2007; Versaci, 2008). Connors (2007), in particular, used cultural criticism and the graphic novel *Persepolis* to create ways for students to deal with tension around cultural differences and make strong connections in similarities that seemed buried. *Persepolis* is also an exemplar text for "offer[ing] opportunities to teach critical literacy through 'positioning and repositioning (placing the reader in an unfamiliar position in order to consider the larger world)'" (Fisher & Frey as quoted in White, 2010, para. 4).

The graphic novel medium also has the ability to engage readers in a way that makes it possible to approach political issues with empathy and set aside previously held biases (Juneau & Sucharov, 2010; White, 2010). "Because Satrapi's story represents voices not often heard from the Middle East or Iran, both in terms of her gender and progressive politics, this graphic novel is particularly important to teach" as it addresses common stereotypes and single stories regarding Iran and what it means to be Muslim (White, 2010, para. 6). Therefore, we argue, like Connors and others (Chun, 2009; Juneau & Sucharov, 2010; White, 2010) that graphic novels such as *Persepolis* are critical texts that can be used as tools to approach critical discussions.

The Research Study

Research Methods

This qualitative research study was grounded in teacher action research methodology (Hubbard & Power, 2003). Classroom time for data collection consisted of four literature discussions, which were part of an English 11 class's regular curriculum. (See Table 1 for a list of Common Core State Standards [National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010] this unit addresses.) We followed one small group of 9th-, 10th-, and 11th-grade students (10 participants) who were representative of the diversity of the class and the student body as a whole. Working with such a small group of students is one limitation of this study. Further, this was a group of enthusiastic students within an accelerated program. While this context is not representative of a traditional public school environment, we still believe this study serves as a valuable resource.

Overall, English 11 worked to develop themes regarding facets of identity such as race, religion, gender, and culture. Before in-class discussions, students independently read an assigned section of *Persepolis* and wrote open-ended, Socratic seminar questions regarding race, gender, and identity that could be used during the discussion. Students were explicitly directed to consider these particular themes when writing their questions (see assignment prompt in Figure 1 and a selection of student-written questions in Figure 2). These questions were compiled and distributed to the group during the discussion. The students discussed each quarter of the book over a four-day period, spread between two weeks. These discussions were videotaped and observed by the researchers; however, neither researcher participated in the conversations. After the group discussions, researchers analyzed the video footage. Each student participant was then interviewed (also videotaped) to question their engagement with the text and interaction in discussions further.

Participants

This study takes place in a Midwestern public STEM school that is filled by a lottery each year. The students who attend come from urban, suburban, and rural districts as well as varying socioeconomic statuses, so the resulting student body is very diverse. All participants were enrolled in English 11 during the spring quarter of 2013. Ashley Dallacqua was not associated with this school, but with a local university. Dorothy Sutton was the English 11 teacher. It was stressed to the students and their parents that there would be no positive or negative consequences for participating in this study. The student participants for this project were identified based on consistent class participation (especially in a previous discussion of gender in Sophocles' *Antigone*), documented in field notes by both researchers. We especially noted instances when students discussed their opinions in conversation with other group members. We did not select students based on perceived level of interest in reading or ability. Parent consent and student assent were obtained for all ten students. (See Table 2 for participant information.)

Table 1. Common Core State Standards addressed in this lesson

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2: Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3: Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.5: Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.2: Determine two or more central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to provide a complex analysis; provide an objective summary of the text.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.3: Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.6: Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective, analyzing how style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness, or beauty of the text.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.7: Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis, and tone used.

While reading *Persepolis*, consider the roles of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, as well as other important facets of identity. For each volume of the text, prepare 4 Socratic seminar discussion questions—2 for each half. There are two volumes in *The Complete Persepolis*, so students need to prepare a total of 8 questions for the entire text:

2 discussion questions for pages 1–71 ("the veil" through "the sheep")
2 discussion questions for pages 72–153 ("the trip" through "the dowry")
2 discussion questions for pages 155–232 ("the soup" through "the croissant")
2 discussion questions for pages 233–241 ("the veil" through "the end")

Sample Socratic seminar question for *Persepolis*:

On page 6, Satrapi claims she wants to be a prophet and compares herself with other prophets. She says, "I am the last prophet," and five male prophets respond, "A woman?" What does this say about a woman's experience with religion in Persepolis*?*

When writing your questions, include a page number, some background information, and a question that can be discussed. Two questions are due on TaskStream by midnight. Type or paste your questions into the text field on TaskStream; do not attach a document.

Figure 1. Assignment prompt

After reading how she [Satrapi] and those around her reacted when the veil was introduced (pp. 3–5), how do you think you would have felt? Would it have been as much a joke to you as it was to the little girls playing on p. 3? Or would u have faught it and stood up for the right to have to wear a veil like the women on p. 5?

On page 74, when her mother was called horrible names while waiting at the side of the road, what does this say about womens position in society?

On page 79, The Trip Marjane states "I wanted to fight." She stated this because Arabia declared war on Iran. This statement made by Marjane made me think, if the community was so sexist, what would they think of a women being a soldier?

On page 270, Skiing Marjanes friend states, "So whats the difference between you and a whore?" This I stated after they asked Marjane if she has done the sex act, and then Marjane has said she has. But her friends act surprised and angered. This made me wonder, if Marjanes friends did not want that kind of answer, why did they ask?

What do you think about a girl being a prophet?

On page 39, Satrapi's mother slaps her and Mehri (the maid) across the face. How would this be perceived here in the United States during modern times?

Figure 2. A selection of student-written questions (slightly edited for readability)

Table 2. Participants

Participants (Psuedonyms)	Gender	Grade	Ethnicity
Cory	Male	10	White
Charlie	Male	9	American Asian
Dee	Female	10	American Palestinian
Emily	Female	9	White
Jess	Female	9	American Vietnamese
Lane	Female	9	American Vietnamese
Max	Male	9	White
Morathi	Male	9	American Somali
Samantha	Female	9	White
Sara	Female	9	White

Analysis

We have several major sources of data for analysis: students' Socratic seminar questions (which served as a baseline for students' reaction and engagement with *Persepolis)*, the videos of participants' book discussions, videos of one-on-one student interviews, and our own research journals, making it possible to triangulate our data. Following the four in-class literature discussions, we began analyzing the video footage. As we viewed the footage from each discussion individually, we drafted multiple analytic memos, recording all major themes and potential interview questions that could be directed to each participant. Next, we began indexing in order to determine the frequency of these themes, narrowing our data considerably by focusing on those that served as a vehicle for discussing gender. We created tables for each discussion that organized these themes and when they occurred during discussion, then began transcribing talk around these themes.

Our transcriptions and analytic memos served as the foundation for interview questions drafted for each individual participant. Together, the researchers interviewed each participant for one hour. We followed the script of our outlined questions, but also allowed for organic, tangential discussion when the opportunity arose. After individual interviews, we referred back to our field notes, beginning to distinguish emerging themes across our data sources. We recognized that students viewed the graphic novel form as significant to their reading and meaning making. We also noted how this text acted as a window and/or a mirror (Sims Bishop, 1990) for our students to examine issues of gender. We member-checked these broad themes with all ten participants. We also checked more specific findings with Dee individually because she experienced the book as both an American and as a Muslim Palestinian, making her a larger focus in our findings. All participants confirmed these emerging themes.

Following this member check, we entered into our next phase of analysis. Keeping our themes in mind, we began watching and rewatching the individual participant interviews. We made note of instances when participants took up the emerging themes of our study and transcribed those instances, leading us to form more specific conceptual categories (Hubbard & Power, 2003). The resulting categories we examine here are the value of the graphic novel form and how it fostered exploration in identity and oppressive discourses.

Findings

The initial purpose of our critical discussions with *Persepolis* was to create a window through which students could engage with a world outside their day-to-day to explore gender issues. In many cases, that is exactly what happened. The graphic novel medium, because of its vivid images that combined with text content, contributed to students' understandings, discussions, and interpretations of the text. Students often responded to this window by comparing what was on either side of it, resulting at times in an "us" versus "them" discussion. These discussions provided opportunities for students to explore their own identities as well as the identities of characters in the text and peers within the discussion. However, this identity talk also led to victimizing the central character of the story and those like her. Negative and potentially oppressive views held by the students surfaced and were troubled in individual interviews.

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The Value of the Graphic Novel Form

Data revealed that the graphic novel medium made a difference to the readers and their experiences with this text. While this autobiography is dense with historical references and tragic events, the participants agreed that the visual nature of the text made it more approachable as they were introduced to the story, easier to read throughout, and ultimately more enjoyable. In writing a visual autobiography, the author is in a unique position to present her world as she wishes and in an in-depth way. During her interview, Dee shared, "I feel like you're actually seeing how the author wants you to see it to be, and not just like *your* image. But sometimes it's good to have your image. But if it's real-life situation . . . I think it's better to have it like this." Dee noted the value of experiencing an event that is autobiographical in the form the author intends, creating a reading experience that is both individual and communal (Gardner, 2012).

Several readers also noted that the more simplistic illustrations and lack of color (Chute, 2008) allowed them to handle the tragedy in the central character's life. One student noted that the events in Satrapi's life are complicated and complex, the opposite of the black-and-white depiction. The irony and symbolism in the lack of color in this text (Chute, 2008) was not lost on these readers. Instead, it allowed many of the readers to approach a new world, while still having space for interpretation.

As is typical in graphic novel formats, there are gaps or gutters that remain as empty space in between images, further contributing to the ways in which readers are part of the story (McCloud, 1993). In this space, student-participants needed to do work, to make connections, and interpret everything that was happening within this multimodal story. Using the medium of film as a point of comparison, Sara explains that while watching a movie, "you're being told exactly what's happening. In *this* way [through a graphic novel medium], it still gives you a little bit more interpretation." She acknowledged what is required of her as a reader as well as the freedom of interpretation that comes with it. We argue that this narrative, in this format, gave readers opportunities to enter into a new and different space where they could question and learn. Moreover, the simplistic artistic style made it possible for the readers to approach more tragic or complicated events, such as deadly bombings or drug abuse, in a way that did not destabilize them to the point where they were unable to engage with or analyze the text in a critical way.

As the students analyzed and discussed the text, both in groups and in interviews, they drew on the multiple modes the narrative offered. Readers used both words and images as they formed opinions,

supported those opinions, and made meaning around complex themes. We noticed that images played a role in discussions around gender and culture especially. Hair, make-up, and clothing were all visually prominent in the text and frequent topics throughout discussions. One student, Max, noted the small detail of characters' hair showing and how that influenced his interpretation of them, and further, his interpretation of cultural expectations placed on them. He discussed his surprise that certain minor characters would be so against Marjane using a contraceptive, drawing on images to support his thoughts: " It's surprising, 'cause like, even some of them now, in this picture, like almost all of them are showing their hair. (Max turns the book around to show the researchers what he is seeing.) So it's even more surprising then, 'cause they're being, they're going against the rules there, too." While the printed textual content does not refer to the women's hair coverage, Max has read both the text and image carefully, using it to support his claims that these characters are complex and, at times, contrary.

The printed text itself became a visual resource as well, as the author used font and exclamation points in a pivotal scene. Late in *Persepolis*, Marjane is running to catch a bus, and a man yells at her to stop running because she is making an "obscene movement" (Satrapi, 2003, p. 301). Max expressed that he was able to contextualize the people around this more intimate scene (although they are not shown on the page) due to the facial expressions, text font, and exclamation points that are used. Max described this scene as

> . . . almost a power play because they're showing her, not her, but they are also showing the people around her [who are not visible in the image]. 'Cause I'm guessing they're not talking in a whisper, cause there are exclamation marks . . . . In my opinion, anyways, it's a power play to show the others that are around them to not rile up . . . to be cautious.

Max critically read the text, images, and font, equating volume with power to control Marjane and others not pictured. Here both the visual text, along with images seen and unseen, were taken up by the readers as they made sense of the rules and restrictions placed on females and the hegemony that exists in the text. Further, Max actively engaged with the text, filling in the gutters and acknowledging images and motivations that were only alluded to visually, but never physically drawn. By "assign[ing] feeling and motives to characters not otherwise stated in the text," readers "engage[d] in the sort of gap filling that Iser (1978) argues is characteristic of aesthetic reading" (Connors, 2013, pp. 40–41). Here, Max's analysis is in direct opposition to assumptions about reading graphic novels requiring less work or imagination.

Persepolis's form created a window for all readers to access, question, and discuss complex and unfamiliar topics. The multimodal literacies provided by the text encouraged readers to read actively and deeply in order to make meaning across panels. It also offered space for personal interpretation and connection. We argue that the graphic novel multimodal form used here to tell a complex and challenging story, both academically and thematically, supported the critical analysis that happened. This analysis led to critical discussions and valuable connections. Without both the content *and form* of this graphic novel, opportunities to address generalizations around women's physical beings (as discussed above) or subjects such as personal identity and gender hegemony around the veil (which will be discussed in the next sections) would not have come to fruition in the same rich and complex way.

The visual text, along with images seen and unseen, were taken up by the readers as they made sense of the rules and restrictions placed on females.

Identity

This unit provided students opportunities to explore the identities of the characters as well as their own, all of which are deeply rooted in definitions of culture and gender. Many students verbalized that they did not closely identify with the characters in *Persepolis*. Instead, they compared and contrasted the primary settings in the text, Iran and Austria, to their more familiar world in America. When asked to expand upon their dichotomizing these cultures, many students stated that they have little experience outside the US, and the comparison allowed them to place themselves within the text and within a different culture.

With a couple of exceptions, students seemed to view the world within this text as a window (Sims

Bishop, 1990). Participants continuously situated their reading within American cultural norms. One of the aims of this work is to begin to trouble the binary between "us" and "them," and *Persepolis,* we argue, allows for that kind of work. However, fully disrupting such engrained dichotomies takes time and, in our case, further intervention during individual interviews. Several discussions were enough to start this kind of talk, but were by no means the end. *Persepolis* did, however, engage students with another culture and illustrate their own lives as part of a larger human experience (Sims Bishop, 1990).

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Dee, however, has dual citizenship in Palestine and America, so she contextualized the culture in *Persepolis* differently than most of the other students. In her individual interview, Dee stated that comparisons cannot be drawn between America and a third-world country. Dee shared stories with us about her family's experience with education and employment in Palestine and America, using *Persepolis* as the entry-point for discussion. While she chose not to share this in the whole-group discussion, she was able to find pieces of her own identity in the text, which she expressed to us in her interview.

Along with sharing personal anecdotes, Dee also discussed her role within the context of the group discussion. At one point she said:

> I was the only one who was a Muslim girl in that room. I feel like I could make some connections to help make them understand a little more. I feel like I was, like, a connection person, I don't know . . . . If they had, like, some doubt or thought or question as to why they [characters] did this and they weren't really understanding it [the book], I felt like because I understand the situation so well . . . that I can just sort of help make connections.

Dee verbalized that while she had a lot of pertinent information to share, she did not want the discussion to be about her. It was clear that Dee saw a specific role for herself in the discussion.

> I felt comfortable doing it because somebody has to do it. . . . I felt it *was* my role to do that . . . I don't know if any of them have traveled to a third-world country, because I've been to a third-world country before, because I wear a veil, because I'm a Muslim, because I'm the only Muslim girl there. I felt like I was there to sort of bring it back in a way and just, like, keep making connections . . . helping the students there understand it's not the way the book portrays it. Because they [Satrapi] really portrayed it—all of that—it was portrayed in a negative way. Like, women were portrayed in a very negative way in the book, except for Marjane. But I felt like it was my duty to . . . shed some light on it.

Dee sought to trouble the narrow "negative way" women are viewed as a population in *Persepolis*, views and assumptions that carry into how she is seen and treated as a Muslim female. While Dee acknowledges her comfort level with being the "other" in this discussion, this positioning can be problematic, furthering the dichotomizing of American and other cultures. Still, Dee points out her ability to maintain power during discussions, choosing specific questions to pose to the group and holding back and/or offering personal information when she saw fit. During a group discussion about identity, Dee proclaimed,

> Me, personally, I wouldn't hide who I am. I'm very—I guess—I'm very proud of who I am and, like, I show it. When people ask me what my nationality is, I tell them, like, I won't hesitate, and they're like, "Oh, but you were born in America," and I may have been born here but, like, my heart is in my home country.

While there are instances of Dee being othered in these discussions, she was proud to perform herself as a powerful female, Muslim, and Middle Easterner, regardless of the risk involved in doing this in a public space. *Persepolis* provided opportunities for Dee and the group to explore many *others* that get performed, troubling the expected identities (Butler, 2006). It also allowed Dee to see herself mirrored in a text and provided opportunities for her to be prideful of her identity within the group. This influenced group members and drew positive and negative opinions from participants, which we explore in the next section. Ultimately, this text provided opportunities for discussion that could draw attention to valuing and helping "change our attitudes toward difference" (Sims Bishop, 1990).

Oppressive Discourses

The data revealed places where *Persepolis* was also a vehicle to discuss oppression in male-dominated societies. During group discussions, language regard-

ing the veil as oppressive or restrictive surfaced. Many students believed that because Marjane was forced to wear the veil, she became a victim of her government. Dee acknowledged during her interview that "their government overdid it, like, beyond overdid it, because if that was me, that would make me hate the veil if I had to be forced to wear it. 'Cause, like, right now—'cause it's a choice, it's not something, you know, you are forced to do." Although the students recognized the force of the veil in this narrative, they struggled to differentiate norms in *Persepolis* and norms in their contemporary space. This led students to make broad assumptions, as some began to apply the victimization of veil-wearing Muslim women upon their classmates. During one class discussion, Samantha said, "[W]omen were seen as such . . . I don't want to use the word tools, but like people that could be walked on, I guess, that they had to be worn—they had to wear veils to hide . . . to hide part of who they are . . . which I think is kind of sad because . . . as she grows up and figures out that you don't want to hide who you are because that's just dishonest." Samantha explicitly described the veil as hiding identity, rather than a part of it, though her Muslim classmate, Dee, sat near her, voluntarily wearing a veil. When this was questioned in individual interviews, Dee explained, "Honestly, if I took it off, I wouldn't feel complete [touches scarf continually]. It sort of separates me from the rest of the people, but I don't think it hides my personality at all."

While these views were expressed to the whole group on a smaller scale, neither Dee nor the other group members took up the topic of pridefully wearing a veil. This counternarrative of empowered Muslim women is often sidelined. In a similar way, Dee's own counternarrative was quickly passed over for a new topic. Later in her interview, Dee also noted being "victimized" because of her clothing by other students in her school. However, Dee's identity as both American and Palestinian allowed her to make the distinction between force and choice, especially within the context of discussing *Persepolis*. It is discussions like the ones that transpired during individual interviews that need to work their way into the whole-class setting in order to problematize single stories and cultural assumptions, such as the ones we were able to address about Muslim women as victims.

By discussing this text in a Socratic seminar format, students were given power to lead the discussion, and these oppressive ideas were given space and consideration. While not being didactic, complicated and oppressive ideas were expressed and taken up. However, the participants did not always go far enough, resulting in undisrupted dichotomies and negative conceptions. We argue that this kind of critical discussion needs to be extended, troubled, and taken up more frequently in order to help shape students into global citizens.

Implications and Conclusion

This research illustrates that both the text's content and multiple modes contribute to its ability to encourage critical discussions around gender and cultural identity. Images combined with text afforded resources for readers to take up issues, ask questions, and make meaning. In an environment open for discussion, *Persepolis* also drew out attitudes around gender and culture that were both positive and negative. These topics can and, we argue, need to be addressed and troubled in a classroom or educational environment. Educators who are considering using a graphic novel to promote critical dialogue will benefit from including *Persepolis* due to its historical context and diverse topics. Many students stated that they would not have picked up an autobiographical novel set in the Islamic Revolution in Iran, but that the format of the graphic novel made this narrative accessible. Other texts that could fuel this kind of work include *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1997), *Fun Home* (Bechdel, 2006), and *Stitches* (Small, 2009). Each explores difficult topics, and the resulting classroom discussion would be fruitful.

Providing space for these critical discussions and complex texts brings to the surface topics of oppression and marginalization that can be combated, creating safer and more equitable spaces for adolescent readers. It is important that teachers emphasize parameters that will make students feel safe and comfortable enough to share in discussion. We referenced StudyGuide.org for a list of the "rules for Socratic seminar" (Socratic seminar student guidelines, n.d.). An abbreviated version of this resource can be found in Figure 3. We found that students were willing to take up difficult topics such as gender and cultural issues while still (even if unintentionally) maintaining

normative and hegemonic perspectives. While we had the opportunity to trouble these perspectives in individual interviews, the classroom teacher may consider entering the discussion in order to push these conversations further. Alternatively, the class may benefit from follow-up whole-class discussions addressing negativity. Bringing difficult topics into conversation is not enough. To fully challenge negative discourses and divisive conceptions of the world, educational contexts must continuously challenge and question these issues as they arise.

The structure of this study also implicates the importance of time and space for students to approach literature they can personally connect to, along with opportunities to speak out and share. Setting aside time to discuss this text with their peers and teachers allowed students to unpack complicated concepts that had been outlined in their baseline discussion questions. And while not all students would feel comfortable, this was something these students, especially Dee, took pride in. However, it also calls into question why Dee felt it was her "duty" to take on a particular role in discussion. This potentially problematic weight requires us, as researchers and educators, to reexamine school and classroom structures that could be marginalizing to Dee or other students. In order to prepare adolescents to be global citizens, single-story assumptions, such as the veil or other clothing being seen as "victimizing," requires analysis through multiple perspectives and voices. Experiences like the ones within this study develop abilities and attitudes that are inquisitive, working with and against social norms. When offered on a regular basis, though, reading and discussing texts like *Persepolis* can influence adolescents to be citizens who work toward unity that celebrates differences.

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Guidelines for Participants in a Socratic Seminar

1. Refer to the text when needed during the discussion. A seminar is not a test of memory. You are not "learning a subject"; your goal is to understand the ideas, issues, and values reflected in the text.
2. It's OK to "pass" when asked to contribute.
3. Do not participate if you are not prepared. Be honest with yourself and your classmates.
4. Do not stay confused; ask for clarification.
5. Stick to the point currently under discussion; make notes about ideas you want to come back to.
6. Don't raise hands; take turns speaking.
7. Listen carefully.
8. Speak up so that all can hear you.
9. Talk to each other, not just to the leader or teacher.
10. Discuss ideas rather than each other's opinions.
11. You are responsible for the seminar, even if you don't know it or admit it.

Figure 3: Guidelines for Socratic seminar (adapted from StudyGuide.org)

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Connie Swartz Zitlow Awarded the 2014 Hipple Award

Connie Swartz Zitlow is the recipient of the ALAN 2014 Ted Hipple Award. The award is named in honor of its first Executive Secretary and is given for meritorious service to the organization. Connie, a former ALAN president and longstanding ALAN member, has served on and chaired numerous committees for the organization, including the committee that formed the Presidents' Advisory Council (PAC). She has authored dozens of articles and multiple books on young adult literature and is co-recipient of the first Nilsen-Donelson Award for the best article in a volume year for *The ALAN Review*. She is also a recipient of an ALAN Foundations Grant. Connie is Professor Emeritus at Ohio Wesleyan University where she taught young adult literature and served as Director of Adolescence to its Young Adult and Multi-Age Licensure Programs.

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