

## Troubling the Single Story:

### Teaching International Narrative through a Critical Literacy Lens

In 2009, Chimamanda Adichie delivered her popular TED Talk, “The Danger of a Single Story,” in which she both praised narrative as a means of exploring multiple worlds and cautioned against a reader’s tendency to view a single narrative as the definitive story of a particular people, culture, or country. As a former high school English teacher, Suzanne valued literature as a way to expose her mostly white, North American students to diverse cultures both within and beyond the United States. However, demands of the school system, testing, and the invisible pressures of preparation for the “next level” inadvertently led to a representational literature curriculum that bordered on tokenism: a Chinese American text here, an African literature unit there, a few weeks on the Harlem Renaissance. In an attempt to build intercultural awareness, Suzanne often used discussion questions that promoted a single-story mentality. For example, insert any particular text into this question template: “What do we learn about (country/culture) through (novel/story/poem)?”

At the elementary level, Jill, now more than a decade beyond elementary classroom teaching, well remembers the basal readers filled with abbreviated stories that were paced to fit into a “Minority of the Month” approach to multicultural education. In professional conversations with other teachers, both authors have found these to be common experiences; in well-meaning attempts to teach diverse literature, we risk presenting a series of single stories. Such pedagogy can generate stereotypes and, as Adichie says, “The problem with stereotypes is not that they

are untrue but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.”

Now as teacher educators, we both want to instill in our preservice teachers a commitment to the transformative power of literature, but how do we do that while avoiding the pitfalls of tokenism? It is possible, we believe, to teach a single text about a particular country or ethnic group without letting that text become a single story. In this essay, we apply the Freirean (1970) notion of critical literacy to three recent young adult titles set amidst the prejudice, poverty, and war of three different countries to explore how a teacher might guide students to read both with and against the text (Damico, 2012). In other words, we value the awareness of cultures, politics, and history that each text provides, but we also understand the equal importance of applying questions of representation, voice, and power to the study of these novels. In the following discussion, we position the teacher as “problem-poser” (Shor, 1992), generating critical questions and leading discussions with students to learn about particular cultures while also resisting stereotypes and uncovering latent messages of Western superiority. We offer sample questions that aren’t necessarily to be used verbatim; rather, they describe a line of inquiry that teachers can adapt to their particular contexts.

The texts we examine are *In Darkness* by Nick Lake (2012), the 2013 Printz winner, which connects the story of Shorty, a Haitian gangster trapped beneath earthquake rubble, with Toussaint Louverture, leader of the Haitian slave rebellion; *Never Fall Down* by

Patricia McCormick (2012), a National Book Award finalist based on the true story of Arn Chorn Pond who lived through the Cambodian labor camps under the Khmer Rouge; and *My Name Is Parvana* (2012), the third in Deborah Ellis's acclaimed Breadwinner trilogy, which details the captivity of the teenaged Parvana by the US military in 21st-century Afghanistan and flashes back to her family's attempts to establish and sustain a school for girls. These three novels span developmental levels: McCormick's and Ellis's texts are appropriate for middle grades through early high school, and we recommend Lake's novel for upper high school. However, we treat them as a group in order to examine narrative patterns in international stories by Western writers and to provide a model for how a teacher can intervene in such texts to promote critical reading skills.

These texts invite readers to learn about the atrocities of war in regions of the world that might be unfamiliar, or that they have only heard about through news stories. The authors' depictions of these cultures are mediated by their own Westernized experiences, thus many Western youth will find the language and structure stylistically comfortable, accessible, and engaging. For this very reason, we find these texts both promising and troubling. Informed by their identities, the authors craft images of their protagonists that are "Othered" (Said, 1978), albeit unintentionally. While all literary characters are constructions of their authors to some degree, stories have colonial resonances when there is a stark power differential between the author and the subject. As such, these YA novels become a natural platform for students to critically explore Western appropriations of others' stories.

By applying a critical literacy framework to any one of these texts, student readers can develop greater intercultural understanding while resisting generalizations about that culture based on a single narrative. Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys's (2002) four-dimensional approach to critical literacy is helpful in developing a framework for this pedagogy. It comprises:

1. disrupting the commonplace,
2. interrogating multiple viewpoints,
3. focusing on sociopolitical issues, and
4. taking action and promoting social justice. (p. 382)

Books such as the three we attend to in this paper invite an initial, more obvious focus on the third dimen-

sion, sociopolitical issues: French-colonial powers in Haiti, the rise of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, and the history of the Taliban in Afghanistan. These are important pedagogical avenues to explore; however, allowing student learning to stop here misses critical exploration that is perhaps less obvious: the links between power and text production, the ways in which notions of the self and US identity might be troubled, and a reading of text that resists the comfort of "closure."

### **The Power of Story, the Story of Power**

Literature pedagogy easily unfolds around the story itself: students are asked to respond to, comprehend, analyze, and connect with aspects of plot, character, and setting. Critical literacy asks students and teachers to step back from the narrative and ask questions about a text's production. It implies an analysis and critique of the ways that language, power, sociocultural institutions, and texts transact (Shor, 1996; Dozier, Johnston, & Rogers, 2006). Or, as bell hooks (1994) concisely puts it, "Who speaks? Who listens? And why?" (p. 40).

Notably each of these three texts features a main character of color in a contested sociopolitical context, and each was written by a white Western author. Lake is a white British man; Ellis is a white Canadian woman; McCormick is a white woman from New York. While the author's nationality certainly does not discredit the text (each writer documents her/his research into and experience with the subject matter), it does raise questions about power and privilege in publishing. All three writers successfully raise awareness of international abuses and inequities through the stories they choose to tell; however, students might also engage the meta-textual question of how ethnicity, nationality, and class determine which stories are privileged and who gets to tell them.

This leads students to critical analyses of the textual decisions made by each writer. Textual critique "centers upon discerning included and omitted perspectives (e.g., whose voices are heard and not

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heard in a text) and identifying techniques authors use to position and influence readers (e.g., use of loaded words, emotional appeals, etc.)” (Damico, 2012, p. 13). For example, McCormick writes *Never Fall Down* in dialect using the voice of her main character, Arn, a native Khmer speaker, telling his story in English. McCormick, who spent two years interviewing Arn,

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states in the author’s note that she wanted to capture his “own distinct and beautiful voice” (p. 216). In discussing authorial and narrative voice, teachers can ask, “Is this really Arn’s voice? What would change if McCormick wrote in Edited American English (EAE)? What judgments do we make about people based on how they speak?” Middle grade students might enter into this complex conversation by rewriting a passage in

EAE, reading both aloud and discussing their different reactions to the two.

To enrich the discussion, students might also employ close reading to note grammatical and syntactical inconsistencies. For example, McCormick creates Arn’s voice in part by eliminating the -s suffix to indicate plural nouns; however, at one point in the narrative, she writes, “A few *days* later, another big battle. Our *soldiers*, they run in every direction, scatter like rat” (p. 134, emphasis added). Other inconsistent linguistic features include the use of articles, inflection of third-person singular verbs, and use of prepositions. In addition to integrating grammar instruction with literary study, this linguistic analysis can bolster the discussion of a fundamental question: “Whose story is this? (How) can we ethically tell another’s story across differences of race, class, or gender?”

In reading Ellis’s *My Name Is Parvana*, students can also use close reading strategies to unpack questions of representation. One entry point into this discussion is the language used to describe Parvana’s treatment at the hands of the US military, particularly the physicality of the interactions as depicted in verbs. For example, when she is initially imprisoned,

Parvana is *led*, they *walk*, and she is *given a little nudge* into her cell (pp. 18–19). Even the harshest of her punishments, being forced to stand for hours on end, is linguistically softened: when she leans against the wall for support, the soldiers “*move* her away from the wall themselves” (p. 47). Subsequent discussion questions include, “What are the connotations of these verbs? Might an Afghani writer choose different language? What other perspectives of military prisoners are available? How do they differ from this particular representation?” Teachers can again invite younger readers into these cerebral questions through the hands-on exercise of acting out the language of the text: demonstrating what it looks like to lead someone, move someone, or give them “a little nudge.”

While in prison, Parvana references abusive photos she had seen from Abu Ghraib (p. 83), and if students are familiar with these images, they will note the stark contrast in Ellis’s representation of Western military prisons in the Middle East. While Abu Ghraib involves stories of humiliation, rape, and torture to the point of death, Parvana’s captors repeatedly attempt to balance interrogation with humane treatment and cultural respect. The challenge for students is to hold both these and other narratives simultaneously, to do the work of “interrogating multiple viewpoints” (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002), and to acknowledge that “no one group is exclusively entitled to the privilege of representation” (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993, p. 6).

Periodic addresses to the reader in Lake’s *In Darkness* lead to interesting discussions of the “audience invoked” (Ong, 1975; Ede & Lunsford, 2003) by the text. The few times that the narrator, Shorty, addresses the listener as “you,” it becomes clear that he/Lake assumes a privileged reader. For example, Shorty says, “You, maybe you live in a world where people don’t get shot. You think bullet holes in a person look like little circular holes, like red coins. They don’t” (p. 117). In describing his gang activity, Shorty says, “I was living in a place where it was common to eat mud. Don’t you judge me, motherf-----s” (p. 188). A subsequent discussion question asks why Shorty would assume the readers of his story live comfortable lives, free from the trouble of gang violence and poverty. What does this suggest about who has the privilege to read a novel, to consume violence and poverty vicariously but not experience it directly?

Perhaps student readers do indeed know what bullet holes look like, or have concocted desperate foods to quell hunger; perhaps not. However, in the dialectical exchange between reader and text, the reader is also constructed by the text, and this reality provides a way to trouble notions of the self through literature, a pedagogical move taken up in the next section.

## Troubling the Self

One temptation in teaching any of these texts is to build discussions primarily around the tragedies of “The Other” (Said, 1978), one that is constructed as distinctly different from oneself. In well-meaning attempts to understand the tragedies represented in these texts, it is possible that teachers reify notions of difference and Western superiority—“we” are the helpers and “they” are the helped. As teachers, we must be careful to disallow the tendency to characterize certain countries or ethnic groups only by their greatest tragedies and struggles.

A related danger of solely focusing on The Other as represented by the text is that for many Western students, notions of the self, particularly one’s national identity, remain untroubled. In exploring the pedagogy of remembrance, Simon, Rosenberg, and Eppert (2000) encourage movement beyond simply remembering past atrocities so that they are not repeated; instead, they promote a kind of learning in which the learners’ assumptions about identities are displaced and rethought. Remembrance, they claim, is not only a means for learning about the past, but asks us to confront *ourselves* as we are, “historically, existentially, ethically” in the present (p. 8). All three books provide such openings for reflexive questioning and critical discussion.

Interestingly, each text mentions the United States within the first pages of the narrative, emphasizing a strong international presence that is exercised for good or ill. This invites questions around international structures of power and privilege, whether through the discussion of Western literature mentioned in *My Name Is Parvana*, US rap in *In Darkness*, or former First Lady Rosalynn Carter in *Never Fall Down*. One striking claim of Adichie’s talk is that those with power circulate multiple narratives; they are not defined by a single story. The dissemination of Western politics and popular culture as depicted in each book

might lead to analysis of these types of questions: “Parvana reads a lot of Western literature; how much Middle Eastern literature do you read?” “What Haitian music artists do you listen to?” “With which Cambodian politicians are you familiar?” In other words, why is Western political and popular culture disseminated and consumed more widely than the culture of any of the three represented countries? What does this imply about power and privilege on a global scale?

Additionally, each novel elicits specific questions about the national myths of US justice, freedom, and benevolence.

Through the mystical connection between Toussaint Louverture and Shorty, Lake develops a strong link between the Haitian slavery of the past and the black poverty of the present. Is a reader in the United States willing to accept a similar connection between past oppressions and present-day inequities? Does such discussion uncover problems with pervasive meritocratic ideals? And how does each reader’s race, class, and gender influence the way they understand history?

In *Never Fall Down*, Arn’s initial reception in the US is far from welcoming. He experiences bullying in his new high school, including the racist epithet of “monkey” that is frequently tossed at him. This boy who has just lived through the decimation of his village, the brutality of labor camps, and the deaths of family and friends receives a welcome in his high school that challenges the romanticized emblem of the United States as a place of refuge for “[the] tired, [the] poor, [the] huddled masses yearning to breathe free” (Lazarus, 1883). In addition to troubling notions of US benevolence, teachers can direct students’ attention more locally toward themselves and their school to examine the question, “What kinds of difference do we tolerate? What kinds of difference do we marginalize? Would our school be a place of refuge for a new student like Arn?”

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Though *My Name Is Parvana* perhaps softens the treatment of military prisoners, it also blatantly challenges the US liberation narrative in 21st-century Afghanistan. Despite threats from the Taliban, Parvana and her family build and maintain The Leila Academy of Hope, a school for girls. After modest success and

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persistence through domestic threats, the school is bombed to rubble by the Western military, the most striking of several examples of Westerners bungling the culture and disrupting internal efforts toward progress. While students can clearly see the bombing of the school as a horrible error, this can also lead to questions of military intervention in general: "When should the United States military get involved in another country's internal conflicts? When justifying our involvement, to what degree do we trust our government's stated motivation? Whose interests are prioritized? When has the United States ignored international pleas for help?" This line of questioning is potentially enriched when grounded in a comparison of Ellis's fictional text to primary source material discussing US military operations in Afghanistan.

One final concern that bears mentioning relates to the plausibility of such teaching in schools with relative degrees of privilege. Knoblauch (cited in Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993) raises this very question with regard to his own students: "What do my students have to gain from a scrutiny of values and conditions that work to ensure their entitlement?" (p. 64). While a complete answer is not given, he offers this: "My students are self-interested, but they are not only that. They do seek The Good Life, but not at any cost. They cling to their myths, but they also learn and change" (p. 65). In other words, we do our students a disservice when we avoid difficult questions out of fear of potential resistance; we must be wary of constructing a "single story" of our own students.

### **Resisting Closure**

While all three books detail horrific circumstances, all three also have some semblance of a happy ending.

Shorty is pulled alive from the post-earthquake rubble; Parvana is saved from captivity just as she is about to be transferred to a potentially more brutal prison; Arn begins to build a new life in the United States. As teachers, we do want to foster in our students a sense of hope; however, Britzman (2000) cautions against allowing the happy ending of a survival story to cut short the reader's experience of mourning, conflict, and vulnerability. "The unfinished story is the story pedagogy must learn to tolerate" (p. 50), writes Britzman, and so in the teaching of these and other novels, we must allow the examination of suffering and inequities to continue despite the narrative's closure.

What might it look like to pedagogically resist closure? In part, it includes resisting the "single story" of triumph by taking the students beyond the studied text to uncover the real-world ways in which systemic injustices persist. For example, as the United States withdraws troops from Afghanistan, the teacher of *My Name of Parvana* can invite students to research the question, "What is the state of the country today? What has been the impact of Western militaries on citizens of the country? On the environment? On organizations labeled 'terrorist'?"

The teacher of *In Darkness* might ask her students to investigate the rebuilding efforts in Haiti that continue today. Specifically, students might note how different sources tell different stories about the progress of these efforts and the attempt to address poverty in the rebuilding. (Compare, for example, the United Nations Development Programme's optimistic online brief with a 2012 *New York Times* (Sontag) article announcing, "Rebuilding in Haiti Lags after Billions in Post-Quake Aid.") More generally, students might explore the ways in which natural disasters disproportionately affect the poor, using Hurricane Katrina and its effects on the Gulf Coast as a domestic example.

In extending the discussion of *Never Fall Down*, teachers might work with students to understand how genocide is woven into US historical narratives, at times reopening "closed" stories that position us as saviors. For example, how did US xenophobia and immigration policy further harm Jewish refugees during World War II? How do we continue to remember the genocide of indigenous tribes on US soil, particularly in students' home regions? How does fear-based storytelling about particular groups of people allow

well-meaning citizens, not unlike our students, to stand idly by in the midst of ethnic-based violence and prejudice? On a smaller scale, where is this happening around us?

In undertaking such lines of inquiry, students are encouraged to resist the temptation to “close the book” on tragedy and instead to engage as active participants against ongoing systemic inequities. As teachers, we can encourage our students to hold the hope of change and resilience alongside the realities of broken political, social, and economic systems.

Additionally, teachers and students can together explore other texts written from within the featured contexts, thus “interrogating multiple viewpoints” (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). The following list suggests shorter pieces that would pair well with these texts to emphasize a multiplicity of narrative perspectives:

- Excerpts from *Restrepo*, a documentary film by Sebastian Junger and Tim Hetherington, depict a US army platoon stationed in Afghanistan’s Korengal Valley. (The film should be screened and excerpted for contextual appropriateness.)
- “Landays: Poetry of Afghan Women” (Griswold, 2013), available online through The Poetry Foundation, features two-line folk poems about love, loss, sex, and war.
- Short stories from Edwidge Danticat’s *Krik? Krak!* (1995) explore the sociopolitical climate in Haiti from the perspective of women.
- The history of Haitian liberation is depicted by Walter Dean Myers (author) and Jacob Lawrence (illustrator) in the picturebook *Toussaint L’ouverture: The Fight for Haiti’s Freedom* (1996).
- Poetry in *Sacred Vows* (1998) by U Sam Oeur (author) and Ken McCullough (translator) not only gives additional windows into Cambodian history, geography, and culture, but also shows a different model of a Western English speaker collaborating with a Cambodian man to disseminate his story.
- Folktales and legends such as *Angkat: The Cambodian Cinderella* (authored by Jewell R. Coburn and illustrated by Eddie Flotte, [1998]) present a mythical Cambodia far removed from genocide and connect to Western readers through common folkloric motifs.

## Implications beyond the Stories

This way of approaching text goes beyond the pages of a book or the walls of the classroom. Recall that the fourth dimension of critical literacy named by Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) is not only a change in thinking, but involves action toward social justice.

Oftentimes this focus on action and the time it might take to achieve—as well as the time it might take away from other curricular goals—stymie this work. We think that it is possible, even preferable, to frame “action” in multiple ways. The action of critical literacy around the books considered here might mean engaging in a service learning/serve and learn project (Glickman & Thompson, 2009) such as letter writing, speech making, or spending time with and in communities of immigrants and refugees. Glickman and Thompson define service-learning as “an approach to and philosophy of teaching that encourages meaningful connections between school curriculum and community issues” (p. 10).

This approach fits neatly into a critical literacy frame, but it is not the only way to define action. As we learn from teacher Dana Frantz Bentley in Souto-Manning’s (2013) work, action doesn’t always have to look or feel like “big ‘take to the streets’ endeavors” (p. 71). It can include shifts in thinking that inform reading of both texts and culture well beyond one particular piece of literature. As Frantz Bentley observed when, after critical problem solving, students “enacted change in their own behaviors, words, actions, and interactions” (p. 71), the potential for “take to the streets” movement took root within them. When students and teachers are changed, when our thinking is transformed, when we can no longer approach humanity in the same way, action has indeed occurred.

We hope that teachers will explore these and other novels with a variety of settings, authors, and protagonists, as ways to encourage an ever-growing

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ability to read both texts and the world critically, a transformation that opens the possibility for action. By positioning ourselves as thinkers and change agents, as question posers and resource providers, as co-inquirers and co-learners with our students, teachers can provide students with opportunities to learn multiple stories, to investigate their own histories and cultural assumptions, and to learn how to ask and answer questions that push ideas into action.

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