NARRATIVE CRITICAL LITERACY:
A CASE STUDY IN TEACHING LITERATURE

A Thesis in
Curriculum and Instruction

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ABSTRACT

This thesis intends to analyze and evaluate a unit I taught as a part of tenth grade multicultural literature curriculum with the objective of promoting narrative critical literacy in during my year-long student teaching experience at State College Area High School. It is primarily a teacher inquiry in which I draw on writings produced by my students, find patterns and recurring themes, and identify the ways in which they incorporate different components of narrative critical literacy in their reading of various texts. The findings show some limitations and affordances of the unit and lead into suggestions for improvement.

The objectives and significance of this study are explained in chapter one along with the context of my teaching practice and the curricular decisions I made throughout the unit. Second chapter contains literature review, my definition of narrative critical literacy and its relationship to social justice, and the theoretical framework through which I have analyzed students’ work. In chapters three to five, three layers of students’ engagement with the text are discussed and analyzed: reading for characters and plot, reading for “self,” and reading for “other.” Finally, chapter six includes the implications of my findings and the ways in which I can use them to improve my practice in terms of promoting narrative critical literacy in curriculum and ultimately, social justice oriented pedagogy.

The analysis of students’ writings shows that in order to achieve narrative critical literacy, my students needed to understand the concept of discourse, recognize the representational quality of text and its agentive capacity in sociopolitical landscapes, acknowledge the necessity of multiple narratives for understanding complex situations, and identify the relationalities and the power dynamics involved in the context. These concepts and skills shed light on the practices that should be considered in design and delivery of instructions, activities, assignments, and class activities.
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Chapter 1

Introduction: What I did, how, and why

In this case study, I evaluate a unit I designed and taught about the book *Persepolis* during my student teaching year through Professional Development School, a collaboration between Pennsylvania State University and State College Area High School. The central concept of the unit was narrative critical literacy, and my main objective was to help students identify the gaps in a narrative and the moments in which certain voices are silenced or marginalized in relation to larger sociopolitical context of the texts. This thesis is a teacher inquiry into my practice where I analyze my students’ work (mostly their writings) over the course of the unit to evaluate the extent to which the objective has been achieved, the potentials I missed, and the gaps in my teaching may students’ literacy practices. Finally, I will suggest some practical ways for improving the unit by investing on the learning opportunities I noticed while analyzing the data and taking my students’ critical engagement with the text to a deeper level.

Context of the case study

I taught this unit in two regular English classrooms to thirty-six 10th grade students. This group of students consisted of 14 female and 12 male students. Out of thirty-six students, three were African-American, one Latino, and the rest Caucasian. Ten students were identified with learning disabilities and received learning support through individual educational plans.

As the intern in the class, I collaborated with the teacher in designing and teaching the units through the year. I had a closer relationship with each individual student as a result of my position in the class, and spent more time on one-on-one instruction. The unit discussed in this

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thesis was part of my independent teaching assignment where the design, delivery, and evaluation of the unit was my responsibility. My mentor read the lesson plans beforehand and gave feedback on them, observed me and students in class, and made minimum intervention in the process of teaching.

The essential questions of the year revolved around the notions of cultural diversity, tolerance, and development of an appreciation for “other” cultures. We examined many pieces (essays, short stories, graphic novels, poems, TED talks, etc.) by Middle Eastern, European, and African American authors.

The opening lesson of the year was shaped around a TED talk by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, The Dangers of a Single Story in which she discusses how a single narrative about a group of people, told from a position of power, changes the way we view them and dismisses the complexities of human conditions: “The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story” (Adichie, 2009). This quote from Adichie’s TED talk shaped the backbone of our approach to the books we read and also the focus of my unit.

**What is at stake?**

While thinking about my unit and designing the essential questions, I reflected on our previous units and their results. I mostly focused on a problem we faced when teaching Monster by Walter Dean Myers², which showed me the extent to which our practices might have counterproductive results, if we do not pair them with a critical literacy approach. Monster is a book about a young black man on trial for murder and the story in and of itself sparks a lot of uncomfortable discussions about incarceration of black men, about white privilege, racial assumptions, and racism. After finishing the book, we asked our students to describe the setting

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of the novel: Harlem, New York. In the total of 36 paragraphs written by our students, there were only 3 positive sentences. Some extreme examples of students’ imagined Harlem were “…Harlem is a street I would carry a gun [on] for my own safety…” or “… But I would not be walking through Harlem by choice, ever.” Table 1-1 shows a summary of their descriptions.

Table 1-1: Summary of students' descriptions of Harlem

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>People</th>
<th>Buildings and streets</th>
<th>Sounds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Playing basketball</td>
<td>• Old dirty run down apartments, tall and thin / made of brick</td>
<td>• Cacophonic noises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• gangs, threatening groups</td>
<td>• Staircases in the sidewalks</td>
<td>• Mad car drivers beeping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• People in groups (usually old men), sitting on stairs/sidewalks, hanging out in the streets</td>
<td>• Crowded sidewalks, cracked and uneven</td>
<td>• Sirens ring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Poor, homeless</td>
<td>• Dark</td>
<td>• growling dogs attack</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Not caring for each other</td>
<td>• Cement</td>
<td>• guns go off</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Kids skipping school</td>
<td>• Dead grass in front of buildings</td>
<td>• kids scream or play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Smoking cigarettes</td>
<td>• Run down basketball courts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Drinking alcohol</td>
<td>• Litter on streets /overflowing dumpster</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• drug dealing, fighting</td>
<td>• Busy streets</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Speaking using slangs</td>
<td>• Many parked cars</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Police cars</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Not taken care of</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

15 students mentioned crime.

Only positive descriptions of people:
“Most everyone here is very friendly and nice. There’s a young well-built man help that elderly lady cross the street to the drug story. A little boy and a mom walking up to the park to play. I see smiling face everywhere I turn and everywhere I go.”
“I see people laughing walking throw the leaves on the ground and having a good time with each other.”

Only positive description of streets:
“There is a park as any other neighborhoods have. This park is big, maybe six miles total, and is good for exercising.”

The stereotypical nature of their descriptions deeply concerned us, as it demonstrated how the common misconceptions about black majority neighborhoods, created and reinforced through power dynamics of racial discrimination, had been perpetuated through our unit. We
addressed this problem by having the students research Harlem and learn about the history, culture, and other aspects of life in the neighborhood that had been left out of the picture in Monster (Appendix A). We discussed the source of their initial perception of Harlem and talked about the gaps and absent perspectives in every text.

This experience made me aware of the fact that merely reading books by authors from minority groups does not guarantee our objectives, even when they tend to dispel certain stereotypes. The counterproductive effect of reading Monster on our students and the way in which some aspects of our unit worked against our objectives for teaching the book highlights the significance of improving critical literacy practices in language art classrooms.

**Framing the problem through theory**

A potential explanation for the counterproductive results we observed in our unit can be found in the distinction that Homi Bhabha draws between cultural diversity and cultural difference and his criticism of multiculturalism in his essay Commitment to Theory (1988).

Cultural diversity is an epistemological object - culture as an object of empirical knowledge - whereas cultural difference is the process of the enunciation of culture as ‘knowledgeable’, authoritative, adequate to the construction of systems of cultural identification. If cultural diversity is a category of comparative ethics, aesthetics, or ethnology, cultural difference is a process of signification through which statements of culture or on culture differentiate, discriminate, and authorize the production of fields of force, reference, applicability, and capacity. Cultural diversity is the recognition of pre-given cultural ‘contents’ and customs, held in a time-frame of relativism.

Bhabha explains this distinction in more details in an interview with Jonathan Rutherford-- “The Third Space” (2006). He explains how the liberal tradition of cultural diversity encourages “civilized” individual to “collect and appreciate” other cultures as subjects of learning. This western practice, in Bhabha’s view, acknowledges the historical and social contexts of other cultures as it first takes them in, but eventually obliterates the context and leaves the other culture “transparent” against the background of the familiar norms (Bhabha and Rutherford, 2006).
Bhabha’s criticism of Multicultural education policy as a product of the construct of cultural diversity, as he explain it in his interview with Rutherford, is the most relevant part of his ideas to what I had felt about our curriculum:

Although there is always an entertainment and encouragement of cultural diversity, there is always also a corresponding containment of it. A transparent norm is constituted, a norm given by the host society or dominant cultures, which says that these other cultures are fine, but we must be able to locate them within our own grid. This is what I meant by creation of cultural diversity and containment of cultural difference.

Teaching the ‘Other’ text with the purpose of creating cultural diversity in curriculum rather than developing an understanding of cultural difference in students inevitably reproduces the power dynamics in the relation between the dominant culture and the ‘Other’ culture. The Other narrative, subjected (or, forced) to interpretation in terms of the dominant discourse, is approached as merely a container of content. Consequently, not only the content is read and understood through the symbolic system of the dominant, familiar discourse, but also the power of narrative itself is overlooked. The texts we teach under the umbrella of “multicultural literature,” as narratives of an Other identity, loose their textual significance and are reduced to an imitation of the dominant identity.

The construct of cultural diversity approaches culture “as an object of knowledge” which makes it justified for the reader to look for ‘similarities’ and foreclose the meanings by viewing the Other cultural practice as a familiar, dominant practice. Whereas cultural difference focuses on “the process of signifying and the enunciation of culture” which frees the text from “the closed circle of interpretation” and allow it “to signify, to negate, to initiate its 'desire', to split its 'sign' of identity, to establish its own institutional and oppositional discourse” (Bhabha, 1988). The creation of cultural diversity in curriculum by simply adding multicultural texts and reading them without regard to their cultural context feeds into the tendency in multiculturalism to control the dynamic process of the articulation of multiple identities and narratives.
Bhabha draws attention to “the tension within critical theory between its institutional containment and its revisionary force” (Bhabha, 1988). Our well-intentioned attempt to study multicultural literature in 10th grade classrooms, might easily lend itself to the former, if we encourage students to look for traces of Self in the Other, rather than to listen to the Other, articulate the differences, and engage in the hybrid space between Self and Other where new positions and identities emerge. In that case, the “Multicultural Literature” that we study in our class will not reconstruct students’ understanding of the values and interests of the unknown world of Other. Instead, by reducing the Other to an imitated version of the Self, will reinforce their own values by giving them a sense of universality, or, at the points where the values are not similar, a sense of supremacy by portraying the differences as the Other’s failure in achieving progress in its Western meaning.

Bhabha’s ideas helped me conceptualize my focus in teaching my unit on the book Persepolis, a graphic memoir by Marjane Satrapi about her childhood in Iran during the time of the Islamic revolution in 1979. Bhabha warns us about reading any text as the single narrative of a political change by introducing the notion of displacement within cultures. “There is no simple political or social “truth” to be learned, for there is no unitary representation of a political agency, no fixed hierarchy of political values and effects” (1988). The political or social narratives, or in a broader sense, cultures, are constantly engaged in a process of self-alienation. The practices of symbol forming and meaning making that take place as we live a culture are ongoing processes that construct an ever-changing organic identity. Therefore, difference and separation inherently exist within any culture (1998) and necessitate multiplicity of narratives.

I was concerned that our multicultural literature curriculum in 10th grade might go along the undesirable path of validating the existing misconceptions about other cultures or generating new ones as the results of a cultural judgment based on the norms and criteria of our familiar
culture. Because, as we learn from Bhabha, that is what happens if our reading of multicultural literature does not acknowledge the hybridity of culture, or in this case, of political change.

The very choice of *Persepolis* as the single representation of Iranian politics, society, and people in 10th grade curriculum (and most likely in anything the students will ever read) seemed problematic to me. Especially when presented as an “insider point of view” into a strange and unknown land, loaded with the ethos afforded to the author by the virtue of personal experience, Satrapi’s narrative tended to be perceived by the students as the ‘true’ description, or even “definition”, of Iranian people as opposed to the narrative offered by the mass media.

However, I believe that Satrapi’s narrative of Iranian people, if perceived as the “true” narrative, ultimately feeds into the very mass-media-created narratives about Muslims that we try to oppose by adding multicultural books to our curriculum. The central event of the book, the Islamic revolution, is one of the most complicated historical events in the history of the country. Satrapi, six years old at the time of the revolution and coming from a communist family background, narrates the revolution from the single perspective of communist parties, completely ignoring the power of religious institutions in the course of events. For example, Khomeini, the religious leader of the revolution is never mentioned in the book while his role through the course of events is too significant to be ignored in a narrative focusing on the revolution.

This narrative reinforces the polarized dichotomy of fundamentalist Muslims versus modern avant-garde non-Muslims. A very explicit example of this approach can be found in the picture below (figure 1-1), where the narrator categorizes Iranian people into two rigid categories which associate religious beliefs with fundamentalism. This categorization, by denying the nuances of Iranian Muslim community, might ironically validate the stereotypes about Muslims’ association with violence.
These concerns, along with our past experiences with the book Monster, positioned the idea of multiple narratives and listening to silence voices in the center of my unit. The theoretical framework through which I defined my notion of narrative critical literacy will be discussed in details in chapter two.

Potential biases

While examining my teaching practice through this unit, it is important to consider the potential biases that affect my students’ and my approach towards this book and towards our literacy practices. The fact that I am born and have lived most of my life in Iran makes it impossible for me to be neutral about Satrapi’s narrative of Iranian people and the Islamic revolution, as I have lived through the effects and consequences of the revolution in the complex society of Iran. My personal experiences and my proximity to the issue influences my reading of the book and consequently my teaching of it. Although I tried my best to bring in as many different narratives and perspectives as I possibly could, I might have had a tendency to give more weight to the narratives closer to mine.

I also found myself in a self-perceived position of being representative of all Iranians, knowing that for most of my students, I was the only Iranian person they had met. I constantly
reminded my students that no individual should ever be perceived as or be expected to be representative of a whole nation, explicitly about myself and implicitly in all of our activities on the multicultural literature that we studied in class. However, I cannot claim that I successfully avoided such positioning in my own perception of my role in this unit. My speaking from the position of a representative instead of a facilitator might have influenced our class discussions as well.

On the other hand, my nationality influenced the ways in which my students participated in the literacy practices of our class as well. I was introduced to the students in the beginning of the school year as an intern from Iran. Being from the Middle East and from Iran was the first thing my students learned about me after my name, which positioned my nationality in the center of my students’ perception of my identity. I also speak English with an Iranian accent, which constantly foregrounds the facts that I come from another country in any conversation. I learned in my conversations with students at the end of the school year that they have been concerned about offending me by saying something about my country for a long time, including the time we were working on *Persepolis*. The open and safe space that we had built for our conversations about the books that we read was limited by this concern in our discussions through this unit.

Particularly in the beginning of the *Persepolis* unit, my nationality was again brought up in the class by my mentor, kindly as an asset for our class when we read a book about Iran. This emphasis immediately positioned me as the expert in the room, and gave me an authority on the subject in my students’ view which added to the complications of our discussions about the book. In hindsight, the increase of direct instructions and decrease of student-centered research and discussion about the historical and cultural context of the book show that I had eventually grew into the role of the expert, which I perceived to be expected from me in the context of our class dynamics.
The unit: trajectory of curricular decisions

I designed a six week long unit to teach this book with three essential questions, the first of which is the main focus of this teaching inquiry:

1. How can we Identify the moments of stereotypical generalizations in a text, and add the silenced voice to the narrative presented to us? [Critical literacy]
2. How do we shape our identity within and across different social worlds? How do we negotiate the conflicts and tensions?
3. How to read and understand graphic novels? [graphic literacy]

The unit consisted of different in-class and at-home activities. In-class activities were implemented individually, in small groups, or as a whole class depending on the objectives of each. Students engaged in different writing practices as well as reading, understanding, and creating graphic narratives.

In what follows I will describe the activities related to the first essential question of the unit and explain the rationale behind each curricular decision that I made throughout the unit in a chronological order. Chapters three to five include the analysis of students’ responses to each set of activities and my conclusions about the unit based on the results of that analysis.

In order to familiarize my students with the concept of absent perspectives and silenced voices, we started off by reading a children’s book: The True Story of The Three Little Pigs and the Big Bad Boy\(^3\) by Jon Scieszka, an alternative version of the familiar story narrated from the wolf’s perspective. We discussed the differences and similarities between the two versions, the extent to which we trust each of the narratives, and whether any of those two versions could give us a comprehensive understanding of the situation. Asking these questions and discussing them brought us to a common understanding of the central concept and essential question of the unit.

Our activities throughout the unit fall into three categories, each representing a level of critical engagement with the text. These levels do not follow a developmental order, meaning none of them is a prerequisite for the other. Rather, they frame the various focuses of the unit in terms of identifying absent perspectives in the texts. In some of our activities, we focused on the moments where a character’s perspective is left out of the narrative. These activities are labeled “silenced character.” Another group of activities, “silenced self,” focuses on the reader’s perspective and whether it is included in a text or not. The last category, “silenced other,” includes the activities through which students engage with analyzing a text in terms of its representation of “other,” and the voices that are silenced in that representation.

Silenced character

As students started reading Persepolis, I asked them to find moments in the story when a voice is silenced, and write a paragraph that gives voice to the silenced. They had the freedom to choose the format for their paragraph (a letter, a dialogue, other possible explanations for an event, etc.). We modeled the assignment in a class activity, where I picked a moment of conflict and students determined, through a whole class discussion, which character’s perspective is absent. Then, I asked them to write a letter from the discussed character to the other, and add the other side of the story to our picture of the conflict. Following this guided practice, they had two independent assignments throughout the unit to complete the same task all on their own (Appendix B). This activity and the students’ responses to it will be discussed in more details in chapter 3, The Silenced Character.

During the time we spent on discussing the book in class, I noticed that making connections between their own life and Persepolis proves challenging for my students. The complexities of the cultural and historical context of the story limited their connections with the protagonist to similar activities and hobbies. I have heard my students saying “Oh look! This Iranian teenager is listening to Michael Jackson just as American teenagers of the time” (my
emphasis), and considering this discovery as a way of appreciating Iranian culture by “highlighting their similarities rather than their differences”. However, going back to Bhabha’s ideas, we need to keep in mind that the cultural practice of listening to and dancing with Michael Jackson’s music (i.e. the content), if understood through the Iranian narrative, signifies a completely different set of meanings and constructs a different cultural identity than its American version. Through making this connection, Persepolis, as a narrative of Iranian teenage identity, has lost its textual significance and is reduced to an imitation of American teenage identity.

In the short amount of time that we had, engaging with the text on deeper levels did not seem possible, especially because of the biases and tensions mentioned earlier. Therefore, I decided to continue working on the concept of absent perspective on a different text, as we kept engaging in graphic literacy practices based on Persepolis in the class.

**Silenced self**

I changed the final project of the unit to something more personal and relatable for students. The central idea was to complete the same task of problematizing the text, but on a text that the students picked and believed that in some ways marginalizes their own voice. They had to choose a text with which they could identify, identify the moments in which their voice is silenced or their perspective is not included, and produce a text -in any format- that adds their perspective to the larger scheme of the issue or situation.

In this way, they had the opportunity to focus their effort and attention on the critical practice of problematizing the text, as they were already familiar with the context and also had already made the self-to-text connection based on their lived experiences.

During the unit, students completed several scaffolding activities which eventually built up towards their final project (Appendix C). First, they had to choose their text and explain how they identify with it. In our class we had a very broad definition of “text” which included movies, TV series, social media pages, etc. In the next assignment they had to write about a specific
moment in the text which showed or described a truth about them or a group they identified with. Finally, they had to write about the way in which the text left their perspective absent, or silenced their voice.

The objective was for them to realize no single text can show a perfectly “true” and “complete” image of a group of people. Even the texts that they identify with leave parts of the picture out, or in some ways marginalize some groups of people. This decision caused some complications in their engagement with critical practices which will be discussed in more details in chapter 4, The Silenced Self, where I focus on the writings my students produced in these activities.

Along with these activities which were designed as assignments to be done at home, I also used activities to facilitate their understanding of the double-sided role of texts in creating a common perception about groups of people. We went back to Adichie’s TED talk, and discussed the fact that stereotypes might say some truth about people, but not “all” of it. To engage with these ideas more deeply, I asked students to write a form poems called “Just because” poem. This template consists of three stanzas in the following form:

Just because I am ______

Doesn’t mean _________

Doesn’t mean _________

Doesn’t mean _________

I am ______________

These poems helped my students explore the different ways in which they have been misunderstood, stereotyped, or marginalized.

Our discussions about the experience of writing these poems and their written reflection on the experience of sharing the poems with the class (which was an optional part of the activity) and listening to other students’ poems mostly centered around the second essential question of the
unit (Identity construction). However, this experience deeply affected their writings about their texts. After writing these poems and discussing them in class, their language in writing about their texts shifted from absent perspectives and silenced voices to stereotypes and misunderstanding. The affordances and limitations of this shift will also be discussed in chapter four and partly in chapter six.

The final project was a continuation of students’ thought process through the scaffolding activities. They were supposed to present the work they had done on the text, and also add their own voice or the voice of other people who were involved in the situation by creating an alternative or additional text (Appendix D). For example, one of the students made a video to confront the common stereotypes about gamers and interviewed several male and female gamers from different countries. Another students created a poster comparing and contrasting the image of cheerleaders in the movie *Bring It On* with her own experience of cheerleading and some pictures of her team.

Thus far in the unit my students had tried finding the gaps and expanding the narrative to include the silenced character’s and silenced self’s voice and perspective. But the practice of problematizing a text does not stop there. I was not yet satisfied with the results of the unit as we had not tried reading a text and looking for marginalized “other.” The dissatisfaction I felt at this point in the unit is framed through approaches to multicultural education discussed in chapter two.

**Silenced other**

I wanted my students to be able to identify the gaps in a narrative that does not necessarily involve them and their own interests. I also intended to assess my students’ understanding of the connection between the concept of stereotypes, absent perspectives, and the process of marginalization that happens in the text.
In order to achieve these two goals, I asked my students to make this connection in their reflection on their final projects. They had to identify a perspective that is absent even their own project. Also, as the projects were presented in class, I had them answer the same question about two other projects (Appendix E).

The final projects were presented in class in a gallery model: We arranged the tables in a circle and each students had a table and a computer to present his or her work. Most of the students had made PowerPoint presentations, some made posters, and some made short videos. Each student had to read/watch at least two project and answer the reflection questions. Most of the students read/watched more than four of presented projects. Their short answers to the questions on the reflection sheet will be discussed in chapter 5, The Silenced Other.

Throughout this unit, my students engaged in the critical practice of problematizing the text on three layers: silenced character, silenced self, and silenced other. The analysis of their writings on each of these layers, discussed in chapters three to five, reveals some necessary literacy skills and attitudes towards the texts that construct different aspects of narrative critical literacy. The implications of this inquiry include adjustments and revisions on the discussed unit in terms of both planning and instruction in order to help my students approximate narrative critical literacy, which has been the goal of these literacy practices and will be conceptualized in the next chapter.
Chapter 2

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The history of critical approaches in education, as a deliberate and articulated way of questioning and problematizing different forms of institutions and social structures goes back to Freire and his work. From the very beginning of its emergence, the concept of critical literacy has been tied to the issues of social justice and equality. In this chapter, I use Nancy Fraser’s conceptualization of three dimensional social justice, Luke’s work on connecting critical literacy and Fraser’s notions, Grant and Sleeter’s review on literature about multicultural education, and Botelho and Rudman’s work on critical multicultural analysis of literature to explain the shortcomings I see in the definition of critical literacy offered by Luke in his review of the foundations of critical literacy. Through this analysis I define “narrative critical literacy” which will be used to examine and evaluate my teaching practices throughout the Persepolis unit.

Critical Literacy

Luke’s definition of critical literacy in his article “Critical literacy: Foundational notes” (2012) contains the definition of its two composing terms: literacy and critical. In his definition “the term literacy refers to the reading and writing of text” (2012). Along with the advancement of technology and its ubiquitous presence in all aspects of our lives, the scope of what we read and write has been drastically expanded from only printed versions of texts to all new means of communication and media. Therefore, “texts” comprise all sorts of representation through symbolic systems of meaning making, such as images and electronic mediums of communication. Reading and writing, in this context, possess an expanded meaning which is best described as consuming and producing.

Critique, the other important construct in definition of critical literacy, is defined through the practice of problematizing and questioning. Considering the increasing role of information in
the globalized world of twenty-first century, Luke suggests “Struggles over power are, indeed, struggles over the control of information and interpretation” (2012). Through critique, we engage in the complicated dynamics of power in the social and political context of the texts we produce or consume. The nature of this engagement can be situated on a spectrum from mere exposure to transformation. For Luke, the critique begins with analysis: “The term critical literacy refers to use of the technologies of print and other media of communication to analyze, critique, and transform the norms, rule systems, and practices governing the social fields of everyday life” (2012).

The social field of everyday life is comprised of a complex web of various concepts and practices on various spheres of personal, interpersonal, and public spaces. The social construction of identities through which we perceive ourselves and others, ideologies that privilege certain practices or beliefs over others by ascribing value to them, cultures and their processes of signification, institutions through which we perceive and understand our social life, are examples of the concepts Luke uses to conceptualize the project of critical literacy:

“Literacy has an explicit aim of the critique and transformation of dominant ideologies, cultures and economies, institutions, and political systems. As a practical approach to curriculum, it melds social, political, and cultural debates and discussion with the analysis of how texts and discourses work, where, with what consequences, and in whose interests.”

Freire builds a foundation for defining critical practices in the area of literacy in his work with Hegel and Marx’s concept of “false consciousness.” This concept addresses the process through which the social constructs that ascribe value to the beliefs and common practices of dominant groups of society are deemed as “natural,” “correct,” or as the one and only way of living and knowing. Freire bases his conceptualization of critical literacy on the idea that there are more than one way of knowing and acting upon the world, and that new ways of engaging with the world can emerge when we deliberately disrupt the dominant ideologies. This deliberate
attempt to disrupt the false consciousness shapes the backbone of Freire’s conceptualization of
critical literacy (Freire 1970).

Foucault’s (1972) work on power complements Freire’s work by addressing one of the
most significant criticisms that Freire’s notion of critical practice has received: Freire frames the
dynamics of power in a binary of oppressor (who possesses power) and oppressed (who is
affected by the oppressor’s power). Whereas Foucault conceptualizes power as something that is
not possessed, but exercised or practiced. Through the notion of discourse, Foucault argues that
power is pervasive; it appears everywhere, even in micro-scale interpersonal interactions (1977).
Discourse are “ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of
subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them”
(Weedon 1997).

The complexities of discourse and its pervasive presence in all aspects of social and
personal life requires critical literacy approaches to reconsider the ways in which they perceive
power and trace its representations and influences in texts. This new layer of complication not
only calls for a reconsideration of the nature of critical literacy practices, but also for an
expansion of the nature of the texts that are questioned and problematized in the process. If power
is pervasive, if discourse in everywhere, challenging the dynamics of oppression and inequality
needs a more pervasive platform than literary texts.

This issue was addressed in the postwar British cultural studies, where the questions of
“what is worth analyzing?” gained theorists’ attention rather than merely “how and why to
analyze?” Popular culture came to the center of attention as cultural products that both represent
and construct the processes of marginalization in the colonial contexts. As Luke suggests in his
review of critical literacy approaches, critical literacy is this context has “a focus on critical
analysis as counter-hegemonic critique that might … encourage recognition of marginalized
communities’ histories and experiences” (2012). Cultural studies guide us towards a wider
definition of text and literacy. Being literate obtains a new definition if we consider all various mediums and types of text that shape and represent popular culture, which includes the ability to negotiate meaning both as a producer and as a consumer through the plethora of symbolic systems and mediums that we are exposed to.

Poststructuralist theory, by highlighting a tension between the concepts of “interpretation” and “truth” complicates the idea of critical literacy to a higher level. By arguing against “the validity of any definitive interpretation of “truth” from a given text,” Derrida’s notion of understanding a text raises a question on the approaches to critical literacy that are based on finding the “truth” through reading a text with regard to the biases that shape its position. If there is no true interpretation, if the language in itself creates various “versions of social and material reality” (Derrida 1978). how should we negotiate the various possible interpretations? What does a given interpretation of a given text say about the reader, the writer, and their position in the non-binary and discursive power dynamics of their sociopolitical context?

These three theories shape my understanding of critical literacy. The questions asked by poststructuralists and their emphasis on interpretation versus truth makes narrative a central component of my definition of critical practices. An awareness of the fact that no single narrative is able to draw the “truth” and that reality is constructed through various narratives as well as various readings of those narratives is an integral part of the critical literacy that I believe my students need to master. The theories in the cultural studies constitutes my definition of “text” and therefore literacy, which includes all the practices that involve making sense out of the world by consuming and producing texts, in the widest sense of the word. Foucault’s notion of power and discourse influences my definition of critique as the practice of identifying, questioning, and transforming the discursive aspect of text and meaning making.
**Social justice**

The aforementioned issues in critical literacy and their implications for engaging with the relationship between text, discourses, and dynamics of power resonate with the general idea of social justice regarding equality. Understanding social justice through Nancy Fraser’s conceptualization of the three dimensions of feminist movements helps locate critical literacy on the path towards achieving it. She draws a distinction in the visions and goals of feminism throughout the history between redistribution, recognition, and representation in her article "Mapping the feminist imagination: From redistribution to recognition to representation" (2005) and also in an interview with Hanne Marlene Dahl, Pauline Stoltz, and Rasmus Willig “Recognition, Redistribution and Representation in Capitalist Global Society” (2004).

Redistribution involves the feminist endeavors in the world of economy to achieve equality in terms of access and welfare. The vision of change from this point of view, as articulated by Fraser, is an “expanded ideal of social equality” aligned with the socialist tendencies of 1960. Redistribution demands the reconstruction of the economic system which works differently for different groups of people and responds to them unjustly. “To abolish the gender division of labor” (2004) is an example of this movement’s demands which exemplifies the redistribution aspect of social justice.

Recognition, historically emerged in the post socialist era of theoretical dispute on justice, focuses mostly on culture and recognition of difference. Involving identity politics, it calls for attention and ascribes value to differences while challenging the hierarchy of gender identities. By recognizing and valorizing difference, the recognition dimension of social justice seeks “not to mitigate economic inequalities but rather to overcome status hierarchies –through anti-discrimination and/or multicultural policies” (2005).

The shift of focus from recognition to representation marks the most recent expansion of the visions of feminist movements. Rise of globalization and the transnational relations and
institutions that influence women’s issues demanded a more political approach towards social justice, as women started to recognize that the already existing frames of conversation are inherently part of the ongoing injustice. Therefore, merely changing the content of those political conversations does not suffice for achieving equality. As Fraser notes, “Representation is not only a matter of ensuring equal political voice for women in already constituted political communities. In addition, it requires reframing disputes about justice that cannot be properly contained within established polities” (2005). It challenges and questions the structures and procedures in place that influence the way women’s issues are addressed and dealt with.

Fraser’s conceptualization of the three-dimensional social justice offers a theoretical framework for locating critical literacy’s project on the path towards achieving social justice. The goals of critical literacy share the concern for marginalized communities and under- or mis-represented groups with the idea of social justice. In “Critical Literacy: Foundational Notes” (2012), Luke connects these two concepts by framing the focus of critical literacy in terms of the three dimensions of social justice.

The Redistributive dimension, which is mostly focused on economy and access, can be applied to literacy practices if we consider Bourdieu’s concept of capital (1986). While redistributive social justice, in its original use, addresses the issue of economic inequality and the unjust distribution of money and wealth, it can also be achieved through redistribution of other forms of capital, including symbolic and cultural capital. Literacy and literate practices are definitely sources of symbolic capital and therefore, any effort for increasing marginalized communities’ access to literacy counts as an act towards social justice. Luke frames the focus of critical literacy in terms of redistributive social justice as “the more equitable distribution and achievement of conventionally defined and measured literate practices” (2012).

There is also a literacy aspect to recognitive social justice, which emerged in the feminist movements’ efforts for calling attention to and establishing “difference.” This dimension of social
justice highlights the importance of recognizing, accepting, and respecting the differences of minority groups in acting against oppression of non-dominant cultures. Luke, maintaining this emphasis on cultural aspects of oppression, conceptualizes recognitive social justice in terms of critical literacy by focusing on the materials on which literacy is practiced in terms of inclusion and exclusion of certain texts. He frames recognitive social justice as “shifts in the ideological content and uses of literacy to include cultural knowledges and texts of historically marginalized and excluded communities” (2012).

The representation dimension in Fraser’s conceptualization of social justice inherently resonates with the concerns of critical literacy. Representative social justice aims to reframe the conversation of gender inequality as it recognizes “frame” as a “major vehicle of injustice” (Fraser, 2005). Texts, by definition, are means of framing and representation. Therefore, if this dimension of social justice is defined by its goal of reframing, we also need to problematize the ways in which we interact with texts. Luke, focusing on the processes in which these frames (i.e. texts) are produced, frames representative social justice as “promotions of the uses of literacy to represent the interests, values, and standpoints of one’s communities and cultures” (Luke, 2012).

Luke’s framing of the focus of critical literacy in terms of three dimensional social justice sheds light on the role of literacy practices and products in achieving social justice. Critical literacy, by aiming at equitable distribution of literate practices, inclusion of texts of disenfranchised communities, and production of texts that represent diverse communities, turns literacy practices into a platform for advancing conversations of equality and social justice. His conceptualization of the goals of critical literacy helps us articulate the ways in which a critically literate person can become an agent of social change.

There are, however, two important gaps in Luke’s framing of the focus of critical literacy in terms of representative social justice. Firstly, he limits “use of literacy” to producing texts and leaves the processes of consuming them out of the question. He focuses on whether or not the
produced texts represent the interests of all communities involved, but his framing does not encompass the role of the critical literate person as a reader/consumer. In this way, he underestimates the significance of the ways in which one consumes texts and other representations of cultures and identities in reinforcing or disturbing the power dynamics and inequalities in the society.

The act of reading and consuming a text needs to be informed by the ideas related to critical literacy as well as the act of producing texts and the choice of what to read. Readers do not passively absorb what they are exposed to through various forms of representation. The process of interpretation of text and articulation of meaning is an active process through which the readers builds their own narrative. Richard Hopkins, in *Narrative schooling* (1994), describes narrative as “the creation of knowledge through assignment of meaning” (1994). Bruce Pirie uses this idea in *Reshaping High School English* (1997) to explain the reader’s “textual power” in their role as “assigners of meaning” rather than “reporters of knowledge” (1997). By ignoring this textual power in framing the focus of critical literacy, the meanings that a reader/consumer makes while reading goes unnoticed.

The importance of the meanings made by the reader/consumer does not lie merely in their content, but also in the processes through which they are made and the power dynamics that influence such processes. Readers create a new text through their interpretation of the texts they read, and these new texts (interpretations) are highly influenced by a web of sociopolitical tensions. Botelho and Rudman, in *Critical Multicultural analysis of Children’s literature* (2009) argue that “reading is a sociopolitical activity, shaped by the reader in conjunction with many sociopolitical influences upon that reader” (2009). They emphasize the importance of taking into consideration “the institutional component from within which we read, the power relations involved, and their implications for social justice” (2009). Critical literacy, in the effort to achieve
representative social justice, needs to address the active role of reader in making meaning and the influence of the dynamics of power on the process of meaning making.

Secondly, the focus of critical literacy is defined limited to the interests of one’s self and their community. The literate person, as the audience of this call for action, is invited to use literacy and produce texts that represent his or her own under- or mis-represented community, but is not expected to engage in questioning, problematizing, or even recognizing misrepresentations of other communities. Luke’s model of critical literacy does call for engaging with texts about the Other and including them in the conversation (i.e. recognitive social justice), yet, because he does not take reader’s textual power in consideration and, consequently, does not realize the potential of critical literacy for problematizing those texts and questioning the ways in which Other is represented.

**Multicultural education**

The concept of Other’s representation in texts is also discussed in multicultural education. Looking at the ways in which literature in this area views and discusses the ideas of inclusion and representation along with examining the goals of multicultural education in terms of critical literacy offers a framework for filling the gaps mentioned above and moving forward.

Grant and Sleeter, in “An Analysis of Multicultural Education in the United States” (1987), review 38 books and 89 articles about multicultural education and demonstrate five approaches in this area with their goals, the forms of diversity they deal with, the extent to which they discuss the issues of curriculum and instruction, and the amount of practical guide that has been published with those approaches. Among these five approaches, three of them seem to resonate with the ideas previously discussed in relation to critical literacy and social justice. “Human relation,” “multicultural education,” “and education that is multicultural and Social Reconstructionist” each offer a helpful insight into the use of critical literacy for social justice. In what follows, I analyze these three approaches, their strengths and weaknesses, the authors’
suggestions for further work, and what we can learn from them to improve our conceptualization of critical literacy and its goals.

**Human relations approach**

Literature with “Human relations” approach to multicultural education, as Grant and Sleeter note, “conceptualize multicultural education as a way to help students of different backgrounds communicate, get along better with each other, and feel good about themselves” (Grant and Sleeter, 1987). This is the only approach among all whose goal is framed based on understanding the Other, which, in these case, is mostly defined by race and ethnicity. Human relations approach highlights the idea of caring and communication by challenging racial and ethnic stereotypes and prejudices by using “non-stereotypic materials” (1987).

In their criticism of this approach, Grant and Sleeter point out two important shortcomings. First, by viewing communication and cooperation between races as the solution for inequality, the approach ignores issues “such as poverty, institutional discrimination, and powerlessness” (1987). It treats prejudice and stereotypes as products of isolated, individual acts that can be prevented simply by reading and learning about other cultures and does not address the large-scale power dynamics that play a role in creating and perpetuating them. The second addressed issue is lack of theoretical work in human relations approach and the limited focus on teaching guides and incoherent curricular decisions. Most of the literature in this approach is written by teachers, and there needs to be more theoretical work to enhance the balance between theory and practical suggestions.

Even though Grant and Sleeter notice the lack of recognizing power dynamics in this issue, their suggestions for filling the gap of theoretical work in this area remain limited to developmental approaches to individual behaviors. They suggest drawing on “social psychology and intergroup conflict and prejudice formation” or “research on cross-cultural differences, as exists in the anthropological literature” (1987). These suggestions, although useful for
conceptualizing the individual aspect of prejudice, would advance this approach much further and in a more comprehensive way if combined with sociopolitical theories which address the mutual perpetuation of invisible, institutional power dynamics and misconceptions such as stereotyping and prejudice from a critical standpoint.

With its unique focus on caring for and communicating with the Other, human relations approach in multicultural education can serve as a useful platform for an education towards representative social justice. In this way, it can also answer the question that Grant and Sleeter pose on the long-term goal of this approach: “If conflict among racial groups in a desegregated school has been reduced, are there additional social goals to be addressed?” (1987) By expanding the focus from individual behaviors and conflicts to larger scale sociopolitical, institutional issues, we can frame a representative social justice oriented long-term goal for human relations approach in multicultural education. This long-term goal would be a combination of caring for the Other by considering their interests and values in working with texts, and the awareness about sociopolitical contexts of the texts that influence their representation of Other. Critical literacies can be uses as means of implementing these ideas in education

**Multicultural Education approach**

Another approach that helps in framing the focus of critical literacy is labeled “Multicultural Education.” (Capital M and capital E are used to distinguish between this particular approach and the general area of multicultural education) Grant and Sleeter’s review of the literature that has adopted this approach includes a clear articulation of its goals, most of which resonate with my idea of the intersection of representative social justice and critical literacy: “Promoting strength and value of cultural diversity, human rights and respect for cultural diversity, alternative life choices for people, social justice and equal opportunity for all people, and equity in distribution of power among members of all ethnic groups” (Gollnick 1980). Multicultural Education approach, with goals that focus mostly on cultural diversity, takes a
stance against the concept of assimilation and orients learning towards the interests and values of the Other as well as the Self.

However, there is a downside to this focus on culture as it ignores the social aspect of inequality and discrimination. Although in comparison to human relations, this approach appears to be more conscious of the collective aspects of prejudice beyond individual actions, yet it creates room for misunderstandings that Grant and Sleeter find counterproductive: “Emphasizing culture at the expense of social stratification may suggest to those Whites who prefer not to confront racism that maintaining and valuing cultural differences is the main goal of multicultural education” (Grant and Sleeter, 1987). This tension is not limited to racial discrimination. This misconception of multicultural education plays into any form of oppression and reinforces this type of tension between any dominant community and the communities that have been Othered.

The distinction that Bhabha draws between cultural diversity and cultural difference (chapter 1), explains the issue with Multicultural Education’s focus on culture. Viewing the Other culture as merely content, or as some knowledge to “acquire,” dismisses the importance of the processes of signification and the discourses within which those cultures are shaped and understood. In addition to ignoring the sociopolitical aspects of the issue, this approach also depicts Other cultures as homogenous entities that can be taught and learned by adding “diverse material” to the curriculum. This approach, at its best, aims towards recognitive social justice and stops there, without addressing the representative aspect of social justice.

The recognitive tendency of Multicultural Education is also evident in its imbalanced emphasis on curriculum issues and instruction issues, which is why critical literacy is an essential addition to this approach for achieving representative social justice. As Grant and Sleeter put it, “The authors discuss curriculum much more than instruction; they critique materials, recommend specific materials for teaching about ethnic groups, and suggest approaches to multicultural curriculum design and curriculum revision” (1987). Yet, they do not discuss the how of education
as much as they do for the *what* of it. This is where critical literacy should enter the conversation and offer a new perspective to these approaches to ensure the promotion of reading and learning *for* the Other as well as the already established practice of reading and learning *about* the Other. Reading *for* the Other entails the goals of both human relations approach and Multicultural Education approach on the basis of critical literacy and representative social justice.

**Education that is multicultural and social Reconstructionist**

The “education that is multicultural and social reconstructionist” approach contains all that is missing in human relations and Multicultural Education approaches in terms of addressing the sociopolitical aspects of difference and inequality. The literature in this approach not only acknowledges and questions institutional inequalities, but also aims for preparing students for social action. The goals mentioned in this body of literature “suggest more emphasis on helping students "gain a better understanding of the causes of oppression and inequality and ways in which these social problems might be eliminated” (Suzuki, 1984).” (1987) Furthermore, by suggesting the restructuring of classrooms to more democratic spaces, the multicultural and social Reconstructionist education intents to provide students with spaces to practice democratic processes. “Students should learn to use power for collective betterment, rather than learning mainly obedience” (Grant and Sleeter 1987).

There is no explicit mention of advocating for the Other in Grant and Sleeter’s review of the education that is multicultural and social reconstructionist. However, this approach entails the responsibility of the citizen of democratic society to question authority and act against the institutional biases and discriminations. If we do not limit our understanding of this responsibility to the interests and values of the learner’s Self, and expand it to taking action for the Other, this approach can offer the platform we need to implement critical literacy for social justice. Particularly because the literature with this approach acknowledges a wider variety of human diversity in their definition of the Other.
Before moving forward and explaining my conceptualization of critical literacy, it must be noted that the relationship between multicultural education and critical literacy goes beyond a mere commonality in goals and visions, and possesses a nature of necessity. Critical literacy is necessary for the realization of multicultural education’s goals and vision, as there is no possible way for achieving equality without engaging in the practice of critique and problematization of power dynamics and institutional processes of signification that shape our exposure to and understanding of Other cultures.

Botelho and Rudman, in their collection of articles *Critical Multicultural Analysis of Children’s Literature* (2009) maintain a position towards children’s literature that is expandable to the general idea of multicultural education. They argue that through viewing multicultural literature as literature about Othered groups of society and aiming to merely learn about those group by reading about them, we ignore the social issue of oppression based on difference. “Without the critical component, multicultural children’s literature disallows the problematizing of children’s literature, reading, childhood, and the enterprise of publishing children’s books” (Botelho and Rudman, 2009). The list of issues that must be problematized goes on to all other issues related to and affected by discourse and power dynamics mentioned in this chapter.

**Narrative critical literacy**

I base my conceptualization of narrative critical literacy and its goal on these three approaches to multicultural education and Luke’s framing of critical literacy for three-dimensional social justice, mainly the representation aspect. I believe critical literacy must invite students as both producers/writers and consumers/readers to recognize the mutual influence of power dynamics of the society and texts as forms of representation. As producers, they should be able to use literacy to present their culture effectively to add their own narrative to the bigger picture of culture and society. As consumers, they should be able to find the gaps and silences in the presented narratives both about themselves and about Others in texts. They need to
understand cultural differences (rather than being merely exposed to representations of cultural diversity) and be able to locate and include various narratives of Otherness to distort the homogenous picture that is too often portrayed and ignores the nuances of the context in the process of signification.

Throughout next chapters of this thesis I analyze my students’ writings, as representations of their engagement with text both as consumers and producers, in terms of narrative critical literacy. My students’ writing led my focus to four general areas:

- Their understanding of discourses and power dynamics in the text and its context, which will be analyzed based on Foucault’s notion of power,

- Their awareness of the multiplicity of narratives and interpretations as opposed to one valid or correct narrative or interpretation, my analysis of which is informed by post-structuralism,

- The extent to which they recognize the agentive capacity of texts in questioning or perpetuating marginalization, which is important considering Fraser’s (2015) notion of representational dimension of social justice and the idea of “framing as the major vehicle of injustice”

- The ways in which they deal with the concepts of Otherness and inclusion, which will be analyzed through the lens of different approaches to multicultural education.

I use my findings from to improve my teaching practice towards a more deliberate attempt to develop narrative critical literacy in my students, which will be discussed in the last chapter.
Chapter 3

Silenced Character

As described in chapter 1, one of our recurring activities during the *Persepolis* unit was a writing assignment in which students had to find moments when a voice is silenced or someone’s perspective is absent, and write a piece that gives voice to the silenced character. In this chapter I analyze their approach to text through this assignment, discuss the critical practices they have engaged in, and the shortcomings of this activity and my feedbacks on their responses which failed to lead their critical thinking and reading of text to deeper levels.

Their writings highlight two important aspects of the students’ narrative critical literacy practices:

1. **The concept of perspective**: Their writings in adding the absent perspective to the narrative of Marji’s childhood and/or Islamic revolution show that they perceive “perspective” as a combination of one’s feelings towards and beliefs and values about an issue. Each of these elements offer a space for thinking about the unit in terms of narrative critical literacy and the potential ways to move forward.

2. **Representational quality of the text**: The extent to which the students connect the text with the world that surrounds it and understand the social implications of excluding certain narratives can be inferred from the alternative narrative they suggest from a new perspective. The patterns that emerged in the analysis of their writing demonstrate the different ways in which my students answered the implicit question of “What does the absence of this particular perspective tell us about larger power dynamics?”

**Perspective: emotions, values, and discourses**

Most of the moments my students picked in *Persepolis* and identified a silenced voice in them involve a conflict between two characters which is narrated from a one-sided perspective, a crisis in which a group of people are involved but have not gotten any voice in the narrative.
presented in the book, or a decision made by a character which is hard to understand for the
reader through the narrative of the book. In order to add the absent perspective to the narrative,
my students wrote about the silenced character’s emotions or their beliefs and values which
justify their position in the conflict, their decisions, or behaviors.

**Emotions**

Many of the students chose to write about the silenced character’s emotions and open a
space for the reader (of the book and of the text they produce) to understand and empathize with
the character. The writings with this approach are mostly an effort to process the situations so far
removed from the students’ lived experiences that reading about them did not suffice for them to
understand them. Many of them tried to explore in their writings the characters they had a hard
time relating to, or the characters who were in extremely difficult situations and students thought
the narrative does not acknowledge their emotions properly.

This approach does not get involved with the power dynamics of the situation or the
socially constructed norms and conventions through which the narrative judges the characters in
certain ways and invites the reader to do so. Students who take this approach view the silenced
characters as individuals and offer alternative explanations for their actions without regard to the
institutions that lead the narrator to make the final judgments about them.

An example of use of this approach for the purpose of processing a situation can be seen
in the excerpt below, where a student writes about the protagonist’s grandfather who has been
imprisoned and tortured in the Pahlavi era for his political views and actions. This student chose
to write a paragraph as an entry in the grandfather’s journal, and focus on how he felt during that
difficult time:

I see my wife and daughter a few times, but I’ll do any to go home at night to see them.
They whip my back. With every hit I beg for them to stop. I feel my skin getting tearing
up while the blood drips from the fresh wounds. It’s not always my back. Sometimes it’s
my chest and stomach. If they are not whipping me they are making me sit in a puddle of cold water for hours. They will leave me there even after my hands start to wrinkle. Today I get to see my family. I have to pretend that I’m not in pain when they are around so they don’t look at me with pity.

Although this situation is a product of a political tension and there are many positions of power, processes of oppression, and silencing of voices in larger scales, this student has focused on the individual aspect of it. He has offered a narrative of the character’s personal emotions to be added to the narrative of the book which does not go into details about the grandfather’s situation. She tries to process this extreme situation through her writing and to do that she needs to acknowledge the pain and suffering of the character involved.

Another pattern in writings with this approach appears in the work of the students who focus on a conflict or a moment when a character is judged by the narrator or the protagonist for a seemingly incomprehensible act. One student wrote about a moment in the story during the Iran-Iraq war when Iraq bombed Tehran. The protagonist, Marji, and her family were having a party when the danger alarms went off and everyone ran to the basement. Marji’s aunt left her baby to Marji, which made Marji question her aunt’s motherly instincts and think of her as a selfish mother. My student chose to write about the aunt’s perspective and what she might have felt in that moment:

I think the aunt wasn't spoken for on page 107 when there is a warning. She handed her baby to Marji and ran to shelter and we all assumed that she didn't really care about the baby and only about herself. She panicked and I don't think she meant to leave her baby behind.

Empathy appears to be the central element of this approach. By writing about the aunt’s state of mind in that moment, this student tries to understand the reason behind her action and invites us to empathize with her instead of judging her without knowing about her perspective.

This approach resonates with what Jean Anne Clyde calls subtext strategy in “Stepping inside the story world: The subtext strategy -- A tool for connecting and comprehending”
In a collaboration with elementary teachers, they ask students to step inside the story and think about, write, or play, what the characters do not say, but feel and think, i.e. the subtext. She then explains the effects of this strategy on readers:

If children are invited to examine lives of others, trying them on for fit, looking around inside the story world, feeling the feelings of characters with life experiences different from their own, it’s just possible that they might become kinder, more compassionate adults, able to empathize with and appreciate the perspectives of others whose lives at first glance seem incomprehensible.

Clyde’s framing of the benefits of perspective-taking shares some important elements with my goals for narrative critical literacy, borrowed from human relations approach in multicultural education (chapter 2): Empathy and appreciating the perspective of others. The students’ engagement with the activity in Clyde’s work demonstrates the achievement of this set of goals.

However, by remaining within the individual sphere of decisions and actions, many of these students miss the opportunity of engaging in critical thinking about the discourses that influence characters’ decisions and actions. For example, in the second excerpt about Marji’s aunt, there is a noticeable space for questioning the definition of “motherhood” that Marji has in mind and leads her to judge her aunt as a not-good-enough mother. What does the ideal, or acceptable, image of motherhood look like in this discourse? How, through what processes of signification, has this image obtained its hegemonic value? These and similar to these questions should be asked from a narrative critical literacy standpoint when focusing on moments like this.

**Values and beliefs**

The students who include the character’s values and beliefs in their narratives are one step closer to this critical practice. They think and write about the system of beliefs that influence the characters’ decisions and use them as vehicles of understanding the character or the situation and therefore engage with the characters’ identities on a different level than the students who
write about emotions and individual personalities. Through this effort, they need to imagine a system of values and beliefs for the silenced character.

To construct their imagined belief systems for the characters, students draw on various symbolic resources. The analysis of these resources and their relation to the values embedded in the author’s narrative reveals the extent of their engagement in problematizing the narrative of the book and of their awareness of the discourses that influence their own reading. Among the students who mentioned the silenced character’s values and beliefs in their narrative, three patterns of approaching the task are noticeable:

A. Some students drew on the dominant discourse in Satrapi’s narrative without questioning it.

B. Some students imagined different values for the character (and, consequently, different reasons for their actions than what the dominant narrative leads us to assume) and implicitly questioned the author’s narrative.

C. Some other students questioned the implicit judgment about the characters (but not the dominant narrative of the book) and recognize the influence of various discourses on their actions.

**Adopting the dominant narrative**

The first group of students have adopted the author/narrator’s belief system as the basis of the silenced character’s values. They draw on the discourse through which the main narrative of the book is constructed and presented, and imagine the silenced character to operate under the same belief system. They view the absence of that character’s perspective not as an ideological choice that is made by the author as a result of privileging some beliefs over others and can be questioned, but as a merely artistic choice for which some alternatives can be suggested.

For example, when Marji tells us about Siamak, a revolutionary friend of Marji’s father who fled the country to save his and his family’s life after the revolution and coming of religious forces to
power, the only reason why we do not hear anything from Siamak’s perspective is that the storyline did not go in a direction to need that narrative. This student, in a letter from Siamak to Marji, explores Siamak’s ideas about the situation of the country at the time, and assumes that his ideas resonate with the dominant narrative of the story:

Now being on the outside looking in the country is in even worse condition than we suspected. Even though the Shah is gone the country is even worse. With all the new rules for the women and what they are supposed to wear. All the violence is so overwhelming, the executions, killings, murders, beatings, everything.

This description of Iran’s situation after the revolution is exactly similar to the image that Satrapi offers to the readers of Persepolis. I am not arguing against the correctness or accuracy of this narrative. Rather, I intend to point out how, among all the various narratives that exist about Islamic revolution just as about any other revolution, the student has adopted this narrative and used it as the character’s belief-system. Assuming the dominant discourse of the book as the character’s belief system and thus, not questioning the ideological reasons of leaving a perspective out, is the most common way of dealing with the silenced characters’ values in my students’ writing.

*Implicitly questioning the dominant narrative*

The second group of students gave voice to the silenced characters by imagining a set of values different than, and not necessarily in contrast to, the dominant narrative of the book. They offered a different reading of the characters’ decisions and actions some of which do not reasonably fit into the plot, and thus, demonstrates that students have acknowledged their own agentive capacity in making meaning out of the characters and ascribing different identities to them. In their writings, the cultural resources on which my students drew to imagine an alternative belief system for the silenced character include patriotism, family values, and “universal” values such as freedom and justice.
Patriotism was a recurring theme in this category of my students’ work. In a moment of the story during the Iran-Iraq war, Marji hears from an acquaintance that some schools in underserved areas are giving golden keys to poor students and tell them that those keys give them access to heaven in the afterlife if they go to war. In Satrapi’s narrative, this is how young adults are convinced to go and fight, as most of them get killed in the battlefield. Many of my students chose to narrate the story from the perspective of the teenagers who went to war and most of them replaced Satrapi’s narrative of them being deceived into going to war with a narrative of patriotism, as exemplified in the excerpt below:

Dear Mom (Mrs.Nasrine), today in school people came to our class and talked to us about going to war. They said we would get gold keys that would let us into heaven... Even though I do not think they are entirely telling the truth, I am very interested in doing it. I believe it is my duty to go to war and it is a huge benefit if the golden key really does work. Many people have protected me and now it is my turn to do the same ... I am fully aware of the dangers of going. However, it is worth the risk to keep you and the rest of the country safe...

In this excerpt, in contrast with the dominant narrative of the book, this teenager is not passively sent to war just for the promise of heaven and a golden key. This student ascribes an identity to him which includes a sense of respect for those who have gone to war before, a sense of duty to the country, and an awareness of the dangers of his decision. In this way, the student implicitly challenges the author’s narrative and complicates it by adding other potential narratives to the big picture.

Another common theme in this group of writings is the presence of the universal values of freedom and justice which replace the author's political or ideological narrative of characters’ motivations and actions. It does not make any change in the plot and the characters might act the same way as they did, but their perspective is shaped by the humanitarian concerns and not their political views and interests.
Many students wrote about the fire in Rex Cinema, the cause of which is still a point of controversy among Iranian historians and also among people with different political views. They noticed that nowhere in the book we hear from the people who were inside the cinema when it caught on fire. This excerpt, for example, describes the disaster from the perspective of someone who has been inside the cinema:

It was so scary. When the fire started we thought, oh this has to be by accident there’s no way that someone would do this on purpose, it has to be a mistake. But, then the police came and blocked our way, they wouldn’t let us help... I think that this was meant to show us what the government was capable of. It’s so cruel that they went this far. Why shouldn’t innocent people have to suffer and die just to prove a point...? How on earth does the government justify such a cruel and rash decision?

At this point, this character does not care about the political agenda of the parties involved in the situation. He cares about the suffering of innocent people. For him, no political interest and no point to be proven is worth the death and sufferance of the innocent. This student does not engage in the complications of the narrative (Who is to blame? Was it an accident? Was the Shah responsible for it or the religious groups?) Rather, drawing on a discourse that appears to be in place universally, he constructs an identity for this particular silenced character who is outraged by the horrible incident.

In both of these cases, students engage in a practice of re-contextualizing, and thus rewriting, the text which inevitably involves the influence of some power dynamics. Whether the students draw on a possibly American sort of patriotism, or on a set of universal values, they separate the text from its original discourses and web of symbolic meanings and translate it to a more comprehensible and familiar set of meanings and identities. As Janks maintains in “The Importance of Critical Literacy” (2013), “The point about re-contextualization is that the new context changes the meaning of the original” (2013). No meaning comes free of discourse. The process of meaning making and construction of identity is always influenced by the pervasive power of discourses in a society. The question here is, are the students aware of the influence of
these discourses on their reading of this text and on their writing about it? Do they engage in critically thinking about the sources of the value they ascribe to patriotism? Or to justice? Or freedom? These are the questions that I will spend more class-time on if I have the opportunity to teach this unit again.

**Recognizing the power dynamics under which the character operates**

This group of students redefine the silenced character’s identity by showing that their actions are not their own choice, but forced or pressured on them by an upper hand power. Most of these characters, often portrayed as unlikable antagonists in the book, are positioned as representatives of the fundamentalist Islamic forces in Satrapi’s narrative. In their writings, students do not question the representation of Muslims in the book, or Satrapi’s narrative of the groups in power after the revolution. Instead, accepting that narrative as an unquestionable basis, they try to exclude the character from that narrative and show how they are trapped in the discourses and power dynamics that control their behavior.

Most of the writings in this group pick up on a conflict or tension between characters. An incident with a policewoman and Marji, with a policeman and Marji’s mother, or with Marji and her classmates and their school principal. In an incident with the principal, she harshly admonishes them for not decorating their classroom in a proper way on the anniversary of the victory of the revolution, and also for that they do not wear their obligatory hijabs appropriately.

The way this school principal is portrayed, both through similar incidents and in the graphic illustrations (figure 3-1), show that readers are not supposed to like her or empathize with her, which makes a perfect character for this group of students to write about.
One student chose to write a paragraph as an entry in the principal’s journal to demonstrate the complex situation that has made her act in this way:

I know I can come off as a bit pushy with all the rules I reinforce, but I only want to help protect these children. They have no idea how lucky they are to be learning everyday, and I don't want that taken from any of them. If they do not wear their veils. I know how much they don't like it, and neither do I, but it is for their safety and education. The stress has been getting to me, I have been yelling at the students more often than I used to because of all of what is going on. But no matter how hard I try they just do not seem to understand my point of view. I am afraid to say I do not like the rules for fear that someone else may find out and things may not end pretty. I feel like a coward, but if others may not have as much patience towards their refusal to obey our laws...”

The paragraph shows a perfect example of subtext (Clyde, 2003) that is informed by the discourses and power dynamics of its social and political context. It explores the character's emotions and thoughts as well as her values and beliefs (her disagreement with the laws, her belief in the necessity of education with any cost) to understand her actions, but does not stop there. The principal’s actions are not perceived as individual actions that are misunderstood in the dominant narrative. The playing factor here is not mere emotion. These students recognize that
the character’s actions are not isolated and personal, and that they are influenced, if not determined, by the larger discourses in place.

All of these students, those who approach the concept of perspective through mere emotions and those who include values and beliefs in their conception of perspective, whether they adopt the values embedded in the author’s narrative or ascribe new identities to the characters, engage in various levels of critic. Each of these practices can move forward to reach a more complicated understanding of the text and a clearer implication of narrative critical literacy. The practical ways of improving these practices will be discussed in chapter 6.

Representational quality of text

In this part I analyze the patterns that emerged in my students’ writings in terms of the text-to-world connections they made based on the silenced voices or absent perspectives in the narrative. My main question here is “To what extent do my student recognize the representational quality of the text?” and the term “representational quality” refers to the ways in which a text represents its context not only through what it shows or narrates, but also through what it leaves out or hides. I intend to study my students’ writing to find signs of understanding the processes through which the author decides to give voice to some characters and silence other ones, and the relationship between these processes and the power dynamics involved in the issues that the author writes about. Based on this questions, I see three approaches to the silenced voices of the text in my students’ writings:

1. Some students make connections between the text and its sociopolitical contexts, and view the silenced characters as representatives of marginalized groups in Iranian society at the time of the revolution.

2. Some students make connections between the text and other discourses and power dynamics which are not specifically related to the context of the story, but derived from their own lived experience. Silenced characters for them represent
the power dynamics that they have been part of and deem to be universally in place.

3. Some students do not make those connections and view the silenced voices in narrative as isolated artistic choices. They focus on individual behaviors and personal conflicts that can be resolved by adding an individual’s perspective to the narrative.

**Connecting silenced character to sociopolitical contexts**

Students who took this approach in writing about absent perspectives in *Persepolis* recognize that leaving a character out of a conversation is not an arbitrary choice and that the reason for this choice can be found in the sociopolitical context of the story. In their writings they search for the answer to a critical question: What does the absence of this particular perspective in this story tell us about the power dynamics in the society were the story takes place?

In the excerpt below a student explore the relationships of power between socioeconomic classes through multiple incidents where a maid is silenced in different ways:

...Mehri’s voice is silenced. She is talking to the boy next door and he keeps sending her letters, not knowing that she is a maid. She ends up asking Marji to right the letters back, and this shows one way she is silenced. Mehri is not properly educated because she is a maid, so she is silenced in that way. A couple pages later, the boy finds out that she is a maid from Marji’s father, and he decides he doesn’t want to speak to her anymore. This also silences her because she has no say in how her future will go and she is being controlled by Marji’s dad. This shows differences in classes because Marji has some rights that not even Mehri has, although she is way younger than Mehri. They are not only in different classes, they were educated differently, they have different views and exercise different rights.

This student does not add Mehri’s perspective to the narrative to challenge the author’s narrative or reader’s perception of Mehri’s identity. Rather, she criticizes the processes of signification that situate Mehri in a position where she can be easily silenced by other characters who possess more power that her. In this case, this power comes from their socioeconomic class
and the differences in access to various rights (e.g. deciding about her own future) and opportunities (e.g. education) among different classes.

Another student worked on the incident of Rex Cinema (discussed in the last section as well) with this approach. He mentions that the silenced voice here is that of the people in the cinema but his writing is mostly focused on the dynamics of power between the government and the revolutionary/religious groups:

In the book Persepolis there are many voices silenced like the people in the theatre on pages 14-15. The people were locked inside the theatre by the police. The people were beaten by the police, if you tried to rescue the people inside of the theatre. The fire department did not show up until 40 minutes later, and... More than 400 people were massacred in this incident. The government blamed the fire and the massacre on a group of religious fanatics. I think that the people in the theatre were silenced because the government blamed all the violence on the religious fanatics and hid the truth from the people.

The accuracy of this student’s speculations does not hold importance in this analysis. What I find interesting in this piece of writing is his attempt to take his thinking beyond the plot, and even beyond Satrapi’s narrative, to explore the struggles of power between the Shah’s government, ordinary people, and fundamentalist religious forces in the political context of the story.

Both of these students recognize that the absence of their chosen perspectives bears a deeper and more significant meaning than their individual role in the story and try to unpack that meaning through their writing. They engage with the text as a representation of its political context and therefore, they recognize that any presence and absence in the storyline might be a statement made about the society.

**Connecting silenced character to other discourses**

Some students recognize the representational quality of the text in terms of discourses other than political context of the book, such as family relations and peer groups. They demonstrate an understanding of how discourse and power play a role in the absence or silencing
of voices in a narrative. The question that this group of students attempt to answer is “What does the absence of this particular perspective tell us about the institutions and discourses involved in the situation?”

One student writes about the protagonist’s silenced voice in a family decision and mentions the family dynamics and discourse that privilege the parents’ voice over the child’s in a decision that affects all of their lives. When Marji’s parents decide for her to leave Iran and immigrate to Europe, she can do nothing but accepting the decision and prepare for it. A student writes a paragraph of Mari’s imagined journal:

Today I was told I would have to leave Iran and live in Europe with my mom’s friend. I do not know what to think about this. I try to tell my parents I know we would most likely never see each other again and it would not be the best idea to send me off, but they do not listen… I cannot argue with my parents. I do not know what to do because they will not listen to me. I think I just need to do what they say but it will be hard to just walk away from them.

In this piece of writing, the student acknowledges the dynamics of power that influence Marji’s situation, which are not mentioned in the book. Although the entire book is narrated from Marji’s perspective, at this point in the story we only read about her emotions of fear, sorrow, confusion, and loss. This student thinks and writes through a critical lens which recognizes the parental power that is exercised in this situation. A power that is granted to Marji’s parents over her through the socially constructed institution of family which is defined, signified and legitimized through cultural norms and conventions.

Another student focuses on the dynamics of peer groups and the tension between various discourses that affect one person’s decisions:

A silenced voice in the Book Persepolis is … when Marji goes to the burger place with her friends. Marji was forced to go she could’ve said no but they forced her and then she was stuck there and got in trouble with her mother for leaving school. Marji didn’t even get to speak they took her with she was under peer pressure … Her voice was spoken down on witch made her feel sad/pressure and that pressure caused her to want to go … she wanted to feel like an adult. Instead of growing up and being mature she left the school and disobeyed her mother. This all could've changed if she would've said no or walked away but the pressure of the other people got to her.
Again, in the narrative presented in the book, we don’t read anything about Marji’s inner conflicts through making this decision. This student steps into the story, reads the subtext (Clyde, 2003), and recognizes that there are discourses in which “being an adult” is defined by certain actions and behaviors. He explores the discursive aspect of individual decisions and how the processes of signification differ from one discourse to the other: in Marji’s peer group, the act of skipping school signifies “adulthood” whereas in her family and also in this student’s view, “growing up and being mature” is signified by doing what she is supposed to do according to school regulations. In this way, he demonstrates an engagement in the critical practices of analyzing discourses and their tensions when they collapse or overlap, and how they construct the character’s identity.

Both of these students, and many others, understand the representational quality of the text to some extent. Although they do not make the connection between the text and its original sociopolitical or historical context, they connect it with the discourses that they have experienced in some way. Family, peer groups, and teacher-student relationships are some examples from the discourses they notice through the story. By adding the perspective of a silenced character to the narrative, they uncover the invisible power dynamics that the characters operate under.

Personal conflict, individual resolution

This group of writings includes the work of students who focus on a personal conflict in the story which is narrated from the perspective of one side, and offer the other side’s perspective to make the situation clearer for the reader without regard to the sociopolitical and historical context or other discourses that influence the situation. The question they work with in their writing is “Why did this character, whose perspective is not included in the narrative, act in this particular way?” And the answer is found in the character’s personal emotions or the relationship between characters viewed in a vacuum and not connected to the larger context of the narrative.
A perfect example of this approach can be found in one student’s writing about the situation between Mehri, the maid, and her boyfriend Hossein, who broke up with her as soon as he realized she is a maid (also discussed in section one, first excerpt). This student wrote a letter from Hossein to Mehri, and described the reason behind the break up on a very personal level:

The person who you told me was your father came over today. He told me that you were not his daughter, but his maid. Why didn’t you tell me? How could you keep this from me? ... I gave him all the letters you gave to me. I wanted him to give the letters back to you. I’m writing you this letter to tell you why I’m giving them back. I could have dealt with you being a maid, but the fact that you didn’t tell me to begin with... you didn’t [tell me the truth] because you were scared that I wouldn’t love you. I can’t love someone who lied to me who they are.

In this excerpt, the complications of socioeconomic class difference and its effect on the marriage institution are reduced to Hossein’s personal value of honesty. This alternative narrative dismisses the discourses in place that resist against interclass marriage, and portrays Hossein as a heart-broken lover who cannot stand to be lied to. This story, told from this perspective, could happen in any other place, time, and context. This reading separates *Persepolis* from its context and limits the possibility of critical engagement with the narrative that is presented to the reader.

There is a significant potential for engaging critically with the text and its social implications in this incident. In Satrapi’s narrative, the seemingly personal conflict between Hossein and Mehri functions as a representation of the socioeconomic class differences and a critical stance is taken by Marji, the protagonist, against the social norms that forbid interclass marriage. The first excerpt in section 1 (Connecting silenced character to sociopolitical contexts), exemplifies one way of this critical engagement by questioning the dynamics of power that operate on Mehri and Marji in an unequal way. Whereas in this excerpt, by reading the incident outside of its context and focusing on Hossein’s personal emotions and values, the student ignores the representational quality of the text and leaves the discourses and power dynamics out of his interaction with it.
My analysis of students’ understanding of the representational quality of the text throughout this unit reveals the importance of contextual knowledge in shaping their reading of multicultural literature. Their ability to locate the text on the intersection of various discourses that shape its dominant narrative and its characters’ identities directly correlates with their knowledge of the sociopolitical and historical context of the text. In order to avoid creating a single, homogenous, and stereotypical narrative of the Other by reading a book about them, my students need to question the book’s representation of Other by dissecting it to the invisible ideologies that construct the author’s narrative. Or, as Janks frames it, “Critic enables participants to engage consciously with the ways in which semiotic resources have been harnessed to serve the interests of the producer and how different resources could be harnessed to redesign and reposition the text” (2003). All of this requires the reader to know about the author’s position (and therefore their interest) on the bigger scheme of the events and also the other influencing or influenced communities and groups. In chapter 6, I will discuss practical ways in which I can improve these activities to ignite more critical ways of thinking about and engaging with the idea of absent perspectives in the text.
Chapter 4
Silenced Self

Along with reading *Persepolis*, my students were working on their own choice text to explore the idea of absent perspectives in a context that is more familiar for them. The final project of the unit was based on their choice text. In this chapter, I analyze my students’ works during the scaffolding activities of the unit’s final project. The assignments and the reason behind each of them are explained in chapter 1 and the assignment sheets can be found in Appendix D.

In this assignments, students aimed at problematizing a text about a situation in which they have been personally involved. For this group of students, identifying representation of self in a text proved more accessible than identifying other’s representation. Data gathered from a check-for-understanding at the middle of the unit shows that nearly all of the students have experienced a situation in which their voice has been silenced. Drawing on those experiences and through their engagement with a text that they identified with, students engaged in the literacy practice of problematizing a text of their own choice.

The analysis of their writings in response to this assignment reveals two components of narrative critical literacy that I should have been more explicit about in design and delivery of the unit. In order to problematize a text students need to:

1. Identify and engage with the tension between the real world and the text in addition to understanding the representational relationship between them.

2. Recognize the power and agentive capacity of the text in creating and perpetuating (or, challenging and disturbing) the dominant narratives.

These components will be discussed and illustrated through examples of students work in the following parts.
**Place of tension**

Narrative critical literacy can also be described as a literacy practice that involves identifying a tension between the real world and its representation in the text, which stems from exclusion of certain narratives about and perspectives towards the issue at hand. By presenting a single narrative and leaving other perspectives out, the text simplifies the represented situation and calls for an effort on the critical reader’s part to seek other narratives and build an understanding of the complexities of the situation on a combination of different narratives. Thus, identifying this tension can be the first step in problematizing a text from a narrative critical literacy perspective.

This word “tension” offers a useful tool for examining the ways in which my students engaged with their choice texts. While examining their texts to find misrepresentations of themselves, or, identifying the moments where their own perspective is absent in a text’s representation of their world, my students located this tension on different layers. Their responses show two possible places of tension, both of which will be discussed shortly by examples of student work:

1. The tension can be located between the world and the text. Students can draw on the difference of the representation offered by the text with their own experience of the situation.

2. The tension can be located within the plot and between the characters. In these cases, there is a tension *in* the story through which a character is silenced. By recognizing the representational quality of the text, students understand the tension *within* the story as a representation of a tension in the real world, and the silencing of the character as a representation of marginalization of a non-dominant group or community.

In this excerpt from one student’s writing, he locates the tension between the word and the text (number 1). He problematizes a movie about high school students based on his own
experience of life in a high school, by pointing out the types of high school students who are left out of the picture:

This [movie] portrays all high schoolers to be mean. However, most high schoolers are not like this. Some of them are the complete opposite and are very nice... Like most movies this movie provides many untrue generalizations. This shows that not everything you see on T.V. is true especially when it is about students.

By identifying the “untrue generalizations” embedded in the movie, he explains how high school students are misrepresented in the movie as a whole. He recognizes a discrepancy between the representation of high school students in the text and his own experience of being a high school student. This recognized discrepancy then marks the place of tension on which he bases his critical engagement with the text.

Locating this place of tension has also helped this reader to understand how these misrepresentations affect our lives, demonstrated in his call for more cautious consumption of popular culture. This understanding of the impact of text makes his engagement with the text more aligned with the goals of narrative critical literacy in terms of representative social justice, and will be discussed in more details in the “power of the text” section.

The next excerpt exemplifies the tensions located within the plot (number 2) which represents a tension in the real world.

Throughout the beginning of the story, the main character says “I didn’t do it”. Over and over, he states his innocence, yet every time he pleads his case he is ignored. He is told that he is incorrect, and he is never trusted… Here, Alex is the silenced voice. There is a single story with teenagers in this story that matches ones with teenagers in this world, that we cannot be trusted regarding more serious topics... This whole situation regarding teenagers being ignored bothers me because I am a teenager, and because my voice will be and has been in the past silenced …

First, by asserting that “Here, Alex is the silenced voice,” this reader applies the concept of absent perspective on the plot. Alex is present in the story, but his perspective is not included in the dominant narrative of the story. The tension that this student identifies takes place within the plot, not in the relationship between the world and the text as a (mis)representation of it.
Drawing on his understanding of the representational quality of the text, he explains that Alex’s silenced voice in the text represents marginalized teenagers’ silenced voice in the world.

The difference with a tension located between the world and the text is that in this excerpt, the problem is not that teenagers’ voice is left out of the narrative. Teenagers are present in the plot even as strong as a protagonist of the story. The issue here is not an issue of inclusion or exclusion, as it is with some minorities that do not get represented in the popular culture at all. Rather, the included teenagers are silenced by adults, just as they get silenced or marginalized in the real world as this reader experiences it. There is no discrepancy between the world and the text. On the contrary, the text reflects the reality of the world as it is, including the marginalization that takes place against teenagers.

These two excerpts exemplify two different approaches towards problematizing a text, both of which prove helpful for developing critical literacy in my students. However, it is necessary for a critical reader to understand and acknowledge that not all texts are fair and just representations of the world we leave in, and that each text sheds light on only so many sides of the issue, situation, or people that it represents. While it is important to identify representations of marginalization and silencing of some voices in the plots and story lines, questioning the dominant narrative through reading literature requires taking a step back, reading beyond the plot, and looking for excluded narratives and perspectives in the text at hand.

I had not noticed this difference at the time and therefore, I did not address it in the feedback I gave to my students. I think addressing this difference could have added to the depth of our class discussions about narratives and also made students more aware of the nature of their work in the final project.

**Power of the text**

Narrative critical literacy is important partly because what we read fundamentally influences our view of the world. Through reading literature, we learn about the times we have
not lived in, things we have not experienced, and people we do not know. We also construct our identities through what we read and write. Therefore, texts possess a power in shaping our assumptions and preconceived notions about ourselves and about others and what we think about history and society. As Hilary Janks maintains in “The Importance of Critical Literacy”, critical literacy involves “the ability to imagine the possible and actual effects of texts and to evaluate these in relation to an ethics of social justice and care” (2013). And that is why Fraser added the third dimension of “representation” to her conceptualization of feminist movements. As she puts it, “frame is a major vehicle of injustice, as it partitions political space in ways that block many women from challenging the forces that oppress them” (2005). This idea can be generalized to other aspects of social justice and inequality.

Not all of my students realized that the narrative presented in their texts has real consequences and that texts do not merely reflect the “realities” of the world but construct them. The extent to which my students engaged with this important component of narrative critical literacy was revealed through the analysis of their work and the role they assumed for the text as they problematized it. They negotiated the idea of the power of the text in three different ways:

1. Those who recognize and analyze the ways in which their text reinforces or perpetuates a dominant narrative.
2. Those who recognize and analyze the ways in which their text questions or disturbs a dominant narrative.
3. Those who view their text as merely reflecting and representing but not influencing the existing power dynamics of their world

**Text as perpetuator of the dominant narrative**

Most of the examples of the first approach come from the work of students who have examined a representation of themselves in their text, and found it to influence what other people think about them. They feel that their story, their perspective, or their narrative of a situation or
lifestyle has not been heard, or that the generalizations made in the text has made it hard for them
to express their individuality beyond those general representations. For example, this female
student’s analysis of a movie demonstrates these ideas:

I think when people first meet me they most likely often see me as Andrew, the jock. I
don’t like to dress up for school, I wear athletic clothes every day of my life, and I’m
good at lacrosse. Just by looking at me I don’t think people realize that I do pretty well in
school. I do very well in history, I like math a lot, and I want to be a physical therapist
when I am older. Science has always been my favorite class except for this year but all of
my friends have always hated science. I do enjoy gym class which plays into the
stereotypical jock thing but there is more to me than just gym.

In the first two lines, she describes the reasons why she identifies with this character,
Andrew, which also explains why he might be perceived as a representative for all the people
who bear the label of “jock.” Through the next three lines she describes her differences with the
character: the characteristics of herself that do not fit in the common stereotype through which
people understand her.

She highlights the importance of such popular texts in the very beginning of her
paragraph “People… often see me as Andrew.” This is where she demonstrates an understanding
of the fact that we perc each other through our prior knowledge and the images we have been
exposed to, which often come from popular culture.

In the last sentence, she offers a definition of stereotypes, based on her own personal
experience and her engagement with the text: “There is more to me than just gym.” She not only
challenges the characterization of Andrew in the movie, but challenges the audience’s use of the
text as a lens to perceive and judge others (including herself). All through her writing, she
acknowledges the power of texts in shaping our view of the world and perpetuating the dynamics
of marginalization and dominance.

Although this approach seems like the perfect example of a critical literacy practice, it
falls short in that it uses the language of “stereotyping” to address an issue that, in most cases, is
larger than merely individual prejudice. As explained in chapter 1, we shifted from talking about silenced voices and absent perspectives to stereotypes as it was more relatable for my students. However, after analyzing their writings, I can see how this decision limited their critical engagement by leaving out the large-scale power dynamics that work behind the processes that result into stereotyping and prejudice. Grant and Sleeter’s criticism of the Human Relations approach in multicultural education frames this aspect of my concerns, as discussed in chapter two, by pointing out how this approach dismissed the social and political aspects of inequality and marginalization (1987).

The danger of reducing power relations to stereotyping and prejudice can be seen more clearly in the following excerpt, where one student addresses racial prejudice through his analysis of a TV show and . One character in the scene he focuses on makes a speech and criticizes the other characters’ stereotypical view towards black people, and this speech is perceived by the student as a resolution for the tension he identifies:

In the fresh prince of bel-air there are a lot of things I can relate to. Race is a big category in the fresh prince of bel air. In one episode Blood Is Thicker Than Mud it talks about race. In this episode Carlton is considered not “black” because of all the things that he likes and how he acts stereotypically black
Carlton: You think I'm a sellout... Why? Because I live in a big house where I dress a certain way? Or maybe it's because I like Barry Manilow?
Will: Yo, he mean Barry White, y'all.
Carlton: Being black isn't what I'm trying to be, it's what I am. I'm running the same race and jumping the same hurdles as you, so why are you tripping me up? You said we need to stick together, but you don't even know what that means. If you ask me, you're the real sellout.

In this scene Will and Carlton are trying to get into a fraternity. The leader of the fraternity does not accept people that are not “black”. Carlton is considered not black because he is not a black stereotype and does not like what top dog thinks “black” people like.

As an African-American teenager, this student relates to the part where black people are “stereotyped,” with certain behaviors, ways of speaking, and lifestyles. There are many dynamics of power in this short scene from the show that he quotes, all of which are left unnoticed in his
analysis of the scene. Carlton’s final speech touches on those power dynamics briefly. “I’m running the same race and jumping the same hurdles,” he says. What is this race and what are the hurdles? And, why do black characters of this show feel the need to have a closed community? How do the stereotypes affect their interaction, and how have those stereotypes come to being? These questions, if asked and thought about, make way for an engagement with the larger dynamics of power that play a role in the situation represented in the show.

However, his approach towards the text reduces the complex issue of race to stereotypes and misconceptions. How would this approach affect his understanding of his world and the ways in which he might be influenced by the consequences of racial discrimination? Narrative critical literacy involves identifying absent perspectives and silenced voices, and yes, stereotypes are direct results of the absence of multiple narratives. But narrative critical literacy also involves engaging in thinking about the reasons behind silencing voices and ignoring multiple narratives. Luke frames the classical questions of critical literacy as “what is “truth”? How is it presented and represented, by whom, and in whose interest?” (2012) Without asking the last question, critical literacy practices remain disconnected from their social and political context and do not culminate in social action.

Text as disturber of the dominant narrative

The second approach is taken by the students who recognize how the text gives voice to a group of people who are often marginalized or mostly underestimated in the real world. The text here is not problematized, but rather admired. They skip questioning the text and finding the absent perspectives in it by finding a text that questions people’s perception of reality, points the absence of its characters’ perspective in the dominant narratives, and fills the gap by adding their perspective to the narrative, which in most cases translates into giving those characters an opportunity to shine. Although what they do is not exactly problematizing or critiquing the text, it still shares some important aspects of narrative critical literacy.
They recognize the discourses that are represented in the text, and acknowledge the significance of the text as an agent of social change. This approach to text is necessary for understanding the urgency of critical literacy practices. The students in this group understand that a text is not a mere reflection of the world. Rather, it has the capacity to question the dominant narratives that contribute to the processes of marginalization in the society. Therefore, they know that texts and various interpretations of them can make a difference in the collective consciousness of a community or society by exposing them to other narratives that complicate their understanding of “truth.”

Another female student takes this approach in her analysis of her favorite TV series:

Phoebe, Ross, Joey, Rachel, and Chandler ... decide to play a “friendly” game of football after watching the game on television... Monica makes the teams girls vs. boys to prove that girls understand and can play football just as good as boys. In the last 30 seconds of the game Rachel ... caught the touchdown and won the game for the girls team. I understood how Monica, Phoebe and Rachel felt during the game. The boys assumed that the girls weren’t as athletic and that they couldn’t grasp the object of the game. I understand a lot about sports and love to participate in team games... I really admire how the t.v. show let the girls justify their side of the story and prove that girls are as athletic as boys...I appreciate that a voice was able to show that girls are just as competent.”

This student works with the idea that a text possesses the power to give voice to a marginalized group of people. The female characters, representing all girls in this matter, are initially portrayed to be unable to understand and play the game, mostly by the male characters of the story: a tension within the plot that represents a tension in the real world. Then, in the last seconds, the narrative challenges and conquers the dominant narrative of girls’ incompetence in sports by ending the story in an unexpected way: the girls win and the boys lose. The TV show that “lets the girls to justify their side of the story” serves as an active agent in drawing the picture of athletic activities by introducing a less heard narrative and adding the female voice to the conversation.

As many students take this approach in working with their texts, it is worth to note some shortcomings of this emerging trend. In these texts, as this group of my students understand it, a
tension is created, addressed, and even resolved within the plot. The problem with this full cycle of emergence and resolution of tension is that it leaves no room for the readers to engage in the critical practice of questioning the narrative and considering the implications of the representations offered by the text. All the work appears to be done, and the reader is left to watch, “admire”, and “appreciate” it.

Nonetheless, the gaps and absences in the narrative need to be studied as well as the discourses and power dynamics represented in it. The poststructuralist view towards literature helps frame this concern in terms of silences and invisibilities in texts. Derrida (1980) maintains that the unsaid and unwritten can be just as important as what is said and written. There is a difference between voices that are absent from the entire narrative, and voices that are present in the narrative but get silenced within the plot by other characters (i.e. when the identified tension is within the plot between characters, and when it is between the narrative and the world it claims to represent). Davies (1999) explains the focus of poststructuralist theory in dealing with these silences as recognizing “what work it is that they [the silences] are doing.” In other words, the absence of those voices functions for the author and their interests in different ways which should be understood, analyzed, and questioned by the critical reader.

For example, has this particular student noticed that all of the characters in the TV series Friends are white? That there are no people with any sort of disabilities or mental illnesses represented in it? These questions and many more questions along those lines should be asked about a show that was on air for more than 10 years and came to be a cultural icon for an entire generation. Does this TV series, with all the stereotypes that it dispels and all the dominant narratives that it challenges, represent the generation of its audience justly? Does everyone feel included in this representation, and if not, what does this invisibility say about the power dynamics of the society and about the producer’s
position in those power dynamics? How are these silences and invisibilities influencing the audience’s social consciousness? Narrative critical literacy will not be fully achieved until the students engage in asking these questions while reading a text and problematizing it.

Another important issue with this approach is that it plays into the dichotomy of “true or false” and ignores the multiplicity of narratives when students use their text, with all its features and details, as an evidence to claim that some common notions about a group of people are “wrong”. They find a text that opposes the misconceptions people hold in reality by giving voice to a less often included perspective (usually aligning with their own perspective) or by looking at a situation (which they have experienced) from a very different point of view. An example of this way of dealing with the text is this excerpt from a student who is a ski racer herself:

There is a stereotype that ski racers aren’t athletes. Our school and the teachers often don’t want to give me time off for ski races because it “isn’t a sport” or “it’s not a school sport”... In Mikaela Shiffrin's Instagram she shows that it is a sport and ski racers are athletes. In the first photo it shows that you clearly need athletic ability to do that, most people can barely make turns down a hill, imagine making turns down a black diamond going around plastic gates at the fastest speed you can. In the second photo it shows that you do have to put time into the gym. You can’t just put time on the hill and expect to be as strong as you need to be to compete well.”

In this student’s response, which is not unique among my students’ responses, the text is viewed as an accurate representation of the world. Shiffrin’s Instagram represents the “correct” way of ski racing and tells the “true” story of being a ski racer. Therefore, it possesses all the credit to dispel the “incorrect” notions of others. Here is where I, as the teacher, pause and ask myself “What if the subject of this text was not ski racing? What if
we were dealing with notions and texts about a historical event, or a social issue, or a political stance?”

This approach, if applied to more complicated subjects and contexts, most likely results into a dangerous simplification of human condition. By introducing a second narrative as “the” correct one, the reader tends to replace this narrative with the currently dominant one, and create another one-sided story that excludes other perspectives. Problematizing a text through identifying silenced voices and absent perspectives is aimed towards gaining a multi-layered understanding of complex events and situations through multiple narratives. Viewing single narratives as “correct” and “true” stories, even when they challenge the hegemonic, dominant narrative, plays a counterproductive role in the long run. This issue will be discussed in chapter 5 as well.

**Text as a passive reflector of the world**

The third approach is taken by the students who locate a tension between the characters and see the representational relationship between the text and the world, but do not recognize how the power dynamics in the text influences the reader’s understanding of reality. They do not see where their text falls on the complex web of discourses in effect in their society. While recognizing the absence of a certain perspective or exclusion of a narrative, usually their own, they do not expand their engagement with the text beyond adding their own perspective.

A student who has experienced being silenced in his swimming team by his coach identifies the same dynamic in a movie and write about it:

In the middle of the movie the team goes to there [sic] first meet. Being an underdog team that was struggling to keep their pool open they faced much adversity and problems. Such adversity held the team back in their swims ...
coach called his team out however despite the other team cheating. He claimed that the boys failed to... fight for themselves. In swimming coaches are usually pretty amped up and strict ... They assume that you haven’t been putting in the work or that you weren’t focused on accomplishing your goals. What coaches sometimes fail to see is just how hard you really are working... Three hours of practice six days a week can take its toll. Schoolwork, chores, other clubs and teams that need you just as much as your swim team does... Just because I have a bad day doesn’t mean I am not committed and willing to work towards my goals.

By recognizing the swimmers’ voice which is never heard by their coach, this student questions the power dynamic in place in the relationship between coaches and swimmers. He deliberately narrates the situation from the swimmers’ perspective (their emotions “having a bad day”, their values “commitments”, basically their side of the story) and challenges the coaches’ one-sided understanding of the situation.

However, he does not go beyond his own personal involvement with the issue, and does not explore the effects of such texts in the actual lives of swimmers and coaches. What remains unnoticed is the texts’ influence on the relationship between coaches and swimmers through portraying those behaviors and judgments as a legitimate practice of coaching an athletic team. This student needs to think about the questions like “How does this text influence the dynamics of the relationship between the people represented by its characters? How would adding other narratives to the picture change the readers’ view of the issue? Where does our picture of a good swimming coach come from?” and other questions regarding the active role of the text in building readers’ understanding of the world rather than the passive role of merely representing it.

The patterns and concepts that emerged from my students’ writing and were discussed in this chapter highlight the importance of revising the unit plan and pushing it towards a more deliberate, explicit, and intentional attempt in developing narrative
critical literacy. The concept of “place of tension” calls for more attention to the connections the students are making. To borrow Keene and Zimmermann’s terms in “Mosaic of thought” (1997), the text-to-self connections that students make should be continued with a text-to-world connection, where they recognize how the text is situated in the complicated world of social relations.

The concept of “power of the text” reveals the need for a focus on, in Luke’s terms, “the significance of the text… in the construction of social and material relations, everyday cultural and political life” (2012). It also shows that this focus must be accompanied by a deliberate choice of language in order to open the conversation to larger issues and their sociopolitical context and with an emphasis on the complexity of “truth” as a construct of narrative and therefore, the necessity of taking multiple narratives into account. In chapter 6, I will discuss the implications of these findings for my teaching practice in terms of both design and delivery.
Chapter 5

Silenced other

Thus far in the unit, my students had made text-to-text and text-to-self connections (Keene and Zimmermann 1997). They had tried finding the gaps and expanding the narrative to include the silenced character’s and silenced self’s voice and perspective. The next step was to identify the gaps in a narrative that does not necessarily involve them and their own interests. Reading “for” the Other as opposed to reading “about” the Other shapes an important component of what I define as narrative critical literacy. The goal that human relation approach highlights for multicultural education is focused on caring for and communicating with the Other. I draw on this goal and expand it to my expectations of critical literacy practices aiming towards representative social justice. I wanted my students to question a text for its representation of the Other and care enough for the marginalized Other in a text to look for other narratives that need to be included. These ideas were the driving force for the question I asked my students in the reflection section of their final projects, as described in Chapter 1 (Appendix E). By asking “Whose perspective is absent in your/your classmate’s project?” I also intended to assess my students’ understanding of the connection between the concept of stereotypes, absent perspectives, and the process of marginalization that happens in the text, as our language for talking about these issues had shifted from absent perspectives to stereotyping and prejudice.

Analysis of my students’ answers revealed two important tensions in their practice of problematizing a text in terms of marginalization and silenced voices: sense of relationality and recognizing power dynamics.

Relationality involves an understanding of the stakeholders in the situation. While reading about a complicated situation or event, a critical reader needs to identify who is related to the situation and how. What’s at stake, and who is affected? Whose voice and perspective do we
need to look for and include in our understanding of the whole situation? For example, in one of the projects, one student interviewed many gamers to add their voice to the conversation about gaming and how it is misunderstood among non-gamer adults. When other students were asked to identify an absent perspective in this project, many of them answered “non-gamers.” This one worded answer does not address the questions mentioned above. Who are these non-gamers? How are they involved in this issue? Only a few number of students demonstrated an understanding of relationality by mentioning parents, psychologists, or gaming industries and explaining “why” it is important for them to have a voice in this conversation.

Recognizing the power dynamics that are involved in the situation (and therefore, in its representation in different texts) allows students to weigh different narratives offered by different entities involved in the situation. The goal here is not to examine “which” narrative is the true or correct narrative, but to gain a sense of how to negotiate multiple narratives of the same issue and shape a more comprehensive understanding of it. In a situation of marginalization or oppression, how do we value the oppressed group’s narrative against the oppressor’s? How do we reconcile the different and sometimes contradictory narratives and how does the concept of power influence our thinking and reading?

To answer such questions, the reader needs to recognize the power dynamics and the purposes behind the construction of each particular narrative. Janks introduces this type of thinking as what critic does for the critically literate person: “Critic enables participants to engage consciously with the ways in which semiotic resources have been harnessed to serve the interests of the producer and how different resources could be harnessed to redesign and reposition the text” (2013). Her focus on “the interests of the producer” helps me advance my discussion of the importance of reading “for” the Other and also evaluating different narratives based on the position of their producer in the power dynamics of the issue.
The analysis of my students’ short, one-word answers to the reflection question highlights the importance of having more explicit conversations in class about the purpose of including multiple narratives and about the ways in which we can decide about the position of each narrative in shaping the big picture. All of the final projects explored a type of marginalization that a student had experienced and all students had produced a text to address that marginalization and give voice to the marginalized group. In that context, the absent perspectives that they mentioned in their reflections fall into five general categories:

1. The rest of people
2. Other groups involved
3. Other marginalized groups
4. Those to whom the stereotype applies
5. Groups in power

Before focusing on each category in particular, I will explain what the number of student responses that fall into these categories reveal about the importance of contextual knowledge in understanding the relationalities and power dynamics involved in a situation. Except for the first category, I consider all other categories to show an evidence of students having a sense of relationality. Categories 3 and 5 touch on the power dynamics of the situation either by focusing on the dominant narrative or by giving voice to other marginalized groups. By this interpretation, 62% of students’ encounter with a produced text show an evidence of understanding relationality, and 25% of them engaged with the power dynamics of the situation (Figure 5-1).

Meanwhile, by separating this data to two different sets, one for the students’ reflections on their own projects and one for their reflections on their classmates’, the numbers change noticeably. When reflecting on their own project, 69% of students’ responses demonstrate evidence of understanding relationality and 31% of them engage in power dynamics. Whereas when reflecting on their classmates’ project, they numbers decrease to 48% and 17% (figure 5-2).
Figure 5-1: Relationality and power dynamics in responses to reflection questions

Figure 5-2: Reflection on their own project vs. their classmates' projects
Contextual knowledge and personal experience play a huge part in this difference between their encounters with the produced texts. In their own project, they work with a marginalization that they have experienced firsthand, and also have been thinking about it for a month at that point. They have tackled with the power dynamics to articulate their uneasiness in the situation in terms of perspective and voice, or, stereotypes and single stories. They know the contexts, and therefore, they have better understanding of the stakeholders in the issue and also of the power dynamics that control the narratives and representations of the situation.

As I believe being critically literate in today’s world requires problematizing texts for the sake of Other’s interest and values and producing texts that give voice to narratives that do not necessarily involve the interests of the producer, I look for opportunities and spaces in the design and delivery of my unit to open the conversation to those issues. A closer look at the responses in each category and what they mean in understanding students’ engagement with narrative critical literacy sheds light to the promises and pitfalls of our collective effort in this unit and shows a way to move forward.

**The rest of people**

This group of responses are the ones who make “relationality” a point of tension in this practice despite its seemingly obvious nature. In response to the question of whose perspective is absent in your/your classmate’s project, they basically wrote “other people.” They did not specify the absent perspective to any specific group of people, or any stakeholder in the issue at hand. Here is where the shortcomings of the reflection prompt play the biggest role as it does not require students to explain their answers. For example, on a project about how farmers are misrepresented in media and consequently misunderstood in public opinion, some students wrote “non-farmers” as the absent perspective and silenced voice. These type of responses do not give any evidence of understanding relationality or power dynamics. They do not show anything about the students’ thought process or about their reflective engagement with the text they produced.
Other groups involved

The responses in this category address a specific group of people whose voice has not been included in the project they are reflecting on, and is somehow related to the issue at hand. There is explicit evidence of understanding relationality, but not any evidence of recognizing the importance of power dynamics. The lack of evidence here does not necessarily mean that the student does not understand the power dynamics of the situation, but it can at least be said that the concept has not been the priority, or worth mentioning for them.

For example, on a project about how baseball players are always stereotyped in the movies and how their real voice is always absent in the scenario, one student mentioned that baseball fans’ perspective has not been included. Fans are part of the issue, of course. But do not necessarily possess any power in the tension between reality and the Hollywood-produced narrative of being a baseball player. They are the audience of the different narratives that is being presented in the original text and in the student-produced one. There is no evidence in this data that shows the student has thought about this dynamic.

Other marginalized groups

The voices mentioned in this category include other marginalized groups whose voice is absent in the project as well as in the original text. These students recognize that there are more sides to a story than two, and prioritize a group with less power to be included in the picture over a group in power. I interpret this as recognition of both relationality and power dynamics.

For example, while analyzing a TV show that portrays women as incapable of working in jobs that are typically viewed as “manly”, a student made a presentation about women who are working in many of those jobs. In reflecting on her projects, she mentioned “males doing typical women's job” as the absent perspective in her project. She seems to have an understanding of the processes that construct the discourses of gender norms and gender-based expectations, and recognizes that the scope of marginalization that happens as a result of these norms is more
expansive than her own personal experience. By identifying another marginalized group, she acknowledges how both texts (the original one and the one produced by herself) leaves those voices out.

**Those to whom the stereotype applies**

The third group of responses includes the work of students who continued to use the language of “stereotype” and “single story” in their final projects. Most of them produced texts based on their personal experience that showed how the stereotype (about a group they identify with) introduced or reinforced in the original texts do not apply to everyone, and that there are other aspects to the groups they identify with.

Among the reflections on these projects, there were students who were concerned about those to whom the stereotype applied. They ask questions like “What if the original text is true about some people? What if the stereotype is not completely false?” These students locate the narrative produced by their classmates within its context and look for other narratives from perspectives that are part of the situation. They believe that although the original text overgeneralizes certain attributions to everyone in a group, it cannot be completely untrue, because it represents experiences of some members of the group.

This approach demonstrates their sense of relationality while trying to complete the big picture of the situation. However, there is no evidence that shows they consider the power dynamics of the situation in their responses. They might have missed the fact that the narrative they want to include in the big picture already has access to venues of expression and being heard. In that case, they are explicitly eliminating the dynamics of power and the politics of representation from their analysis. The nature of this assignment does not provide enough information about this aspect of the student’s thinking.

For example, one student made a video about how soccer players are always accused of faking injuries which included interviews with high school soccer players who have never faked
an injury. Another student reflected on the video by asking “What about those who do fake injuries?” It is not clear whether the student acknowledges the discourses which provide more opportunities for the narrative of injury-faker soccer players to be heard than for the other narrative? Because the answer is not justified and the thought process is not visible, I cannot answer this question.

Nevertheless, this category of responses highlights an important awareness of the fact that there is no “true” or “correct” single narrative. There are soccer players who fake injuries, and there are those who do not. We need to hear/read both narratives to make sense of the whole issue. They understand that the dominant and marginalized narratives all have a part in creating the complete image.

**Groups in power**

The responses in the fourth category mention the voice of the groups in power in the issue that is addressed in the original text and in the project. There are many different ways to interpret the one-word answers in this category, which is why I do not make one claim about the extent to which these students understand relationality and incorporate their understanding of power dynamics in their answers. Instead, I will discuss, based on an example, the significance of these responses, the risks of potential misunderstandings, and the opportunities they open for having conversations about the very nature of narrative critical literacy and its relation to representative social justice with students.

This example comes from a student’s reflection on his project about teenagers being excluded and silenced (also discussed in chapter 4). He identifies the “adult perspective” as the absent perspective and silenced voice in the text he has produced. Throughout the scaffolding writing assignments he wrote about how adults in general marginalize teenagers and do not take them seriously in decision makings about important issues. In other words, all through the unit he has been writing about how the adults’ perspective has dominated the conversation about
teenagers’ capabilities. Now, mentioning this perspective as the missing part of his project raises some questions about his perception of the concept of absent perspectives and of the purpose of critical literacy practices that we engaged in throughout the unit.

Most important of all, this and similar responses made me question the extent to which my students make deliberate choices about the perspectives that should be included in the final narrative. As the original text is narrated from a dominant perspective, and the whole purpose of producing these second texts has been to balance that dominant narrative with giving voice to the marginalized narratives, why do we need the very same dominant narrative in this second text? This concern is similar to the uncertainties I experienced in analyzing the last category.

While I acknowledge the shortcomings of the reflection prompt in encouraging students to explain their answer and write out their thought process, I think there are possibilities here worth exploring in the next attempts of implementing units like this. In what follows, I discuss three different interpretations that I can make from my students short answers. With each interpretation, I explains the possibilities available for taking the discussion to a deeper level and moving the practices towards a more critical engagement with the texts.

One possible reason for this type of responses might be that this student’s reading of his own text does not take the context of its production into account: the purpose of amplifying this specific narrative (the teenager character’s), the social aspect of this literacy practice and how it affects and is affected by the ongoing conversation about teenagers with all the power dynamics that influence it. In that case, the questions that should be addressed more explicitly in the class discussions or in the feedbacks given to students on their writings revolve around the decisions we make as readers and writers: How do we, as critical consumers and producers, decide on which narrative to amplify? How do power dynamics of the situation influence our decision both unconsciously and consciously?
A more optimistic reason for students’ search for the dominant narrative in their produced text might be the recognition of how the dominant group should not be viewed through one single narrative either. While opposing the stereotypical conception about the “teenagers” as a homogenous body of not-capable, immature people, this student shows an awareness of the fact that “adults” are not a homogenous group of people either. The necessity of multiplicity of narratives is woven into his view of any type of text with any kind of purpose and he sees a need for more narratives from both sides to complete the bigger picture of this tension between the dominant group who possesses some sort of power (adults) and teenagers. Investing on his awareness of the role of multiple narratives in constructing reality, this conversation can go further by asking questions like “How should be reconcile these different narratives? How much value do we ascribe to each of them, and how are these decisions influenced by the power dynamics and our awareness of them?”

The most complicated and promising explanation, however, is that these students seek a dialogue between the dominant narrative and the marginalized one about the very topic of marginalization. Granting value to both narratives, they seek the hybridity that emerges from the open space in which different narratives can interact and transcend the dichotomy of oppressor/oppressed or self/other. Drawing on Bhabha’s notion of third space (2006), I believe this approach to narrative critical literacy expands the space in which we, as a class, can engage in critical literacy practices. The question then becomes how can literacy practices create a space for such a dialogue? What resources can we utilize to develop a dialog between these narratives and reach to the hybrid narrative that emerges from their interaction? And, ultimately, how can I modify the unit to expand our focus on these questions rather than the singular, narrowed down practice of identifying the absent perspectives and producing texts that give voice to marginalized narratives.
As the reflection prompt leaves a large part of the analysis to my interpretation of students’ one-word answers, the results of my analysis of this set of data is not as concrete as other chapters. However, they point out some important uncertainties and unanswered questions at the end of the unit that highlight the need for a stronger closure. I will discuss the possible modifications in order to achieve these goals in chapter 6.
Chapter 6

Moving Forward: What I Learned From My Students

In chapters three to five, I analyzed parts of my students’ work throughout the Persepolis unit to understand their thought process and identify the types of critical thinking and practice they engage with while reading a text and are introduced to the idea of absent perspectives and silenced voices. At the points where I find evidence of practices that lead to narrative critical literacy, I want to find ways to bring those practices to the forefront of my unit and use them to approximate the goals of narrative critical literacy and ultimately, representative social justice. At the points where I see a gap or a misunderstanding in my students’ thinking, I want to change the unit in a way that fills those gaps, invests on students’ prior understanding of discourses and politics of representation, prevents those misunderstandings, and makes room for a deeper conversation about issues of representation and critique in class discussions. In this chapter, I will present practical suggestions for improving my unit based on the discussions of previous chapters.

From “Silenced character”

Analyzing students’ responses to this group of activities highlights a great potential in the activity (Appendix B) and also a seemingly obvious gap in the unit. As my students added different voices to the narrative, some of them showed an implicit consideration of discourse in their new narrative of the situation. Some took the discourses of the cultural context of the story into account, and some applied the discourses that they had experience with in their own lives on the characters. Meanwhile, this potential was not realized by some students, as they could not situate the story in its context and see the powers that affect the characters. Lack of contextual knowledge impeded their engagement with discourses and questioning them.
I think activities similar to the activities of this part, paired with more knowledge of the context of the story, allow the students to explore discourses and invisible structures that the characters operate in. Also a more explicit and deliberate focus on discourse is needed to help all students notice the concept and begin the work of problematizing and questioning not only the narrative of the text they read, but also the world it represents.

**Discourse**

The potential that I noticed in my students’ responses for engaging with the concept of discourse in texts, along with observing the effects of ignoring social aspect of characters’ actions on the depth of students’ engagement with the text calls for an explicit and deliberate effort for discussing and analyzing discourses throughout the unit. Students need to situate discourse and power not only in the narratives they are exposed to, but also in their own reaction to and interpretation of them.

A unit aimed at developing narrative critical literacy should also provide an opportunity for reflecting on and questioning the beliefs and values that readers bring to their reading of the texts, by situating them in the discourses that are woven into the reader’s social life. Botelho and Rudman explain this aspect of critical reading in Critical Multicultural Analysis of Children’s Literature:

> Critical multicultural analysis situates language in social and political contexts, as well as taking into account how authors and readers collude with or challenge dominant ideologies ... Critical multicultural analysis can contribute to our deconstructing and reconstructing ourselves and society. It focuses on how language in books works to position readers in particular power relations.

> Deconstructing and reconstructing self and society requires a reflective and critical approach towards the discourses that shape the reader’s identity. As demonstrated in chapter 3, students’ judgements about characters’ actions are influenced by their own system of beliefs. This aspect of their engagement with the text could have made a perfect opportunity for that type of reflection. What my students assume about the characters most of the time speaks to their own
belief-systems. An explicit effort on my part to open the space for such conversations would allow them to think about how they have come to believe that set of ideas, deconstruct them, identify the role of power and authority in shaping them, and reconstruct them with a higher level of awareness about the sources of their own beliefs.

Subtext strategy, introduced by Clyde (2003) and discussed in chapter 3, can be used with some modifications as a systematic way of examining discourses in the narrative and in reader’s social consciousness. While subtext strategy, in the way that is designed for elementary students, focuses on the characters’ emotions and thoughts in different moments of the story line, I would suggest drawing a clear distinction between characters’ emotions and values and focusing on both. My students demonstrated clear understanding of how personal values and beliefs affect characters’ actions and decisions. Asking questions like “Why did this character act in this way? Why did she/he make this choice?” in the same way that subtext strategy asks about characters’ feelings, offers a space for exploring the reasons behind characters’ choices and actions, the values that drive those reasons, and the discourse and ideologies that signifies those values.

Taking this strategy to a metacognitive level, I would ask students to think of themselves as characters of a narrative. Explore their assumptions about characters and find out where those assumptions obtain their validity in their belief system. How do their own values influence their reading of the text and their judgements about characters? Where have those values come from? Where in their social life are those values valid or invalid? Under what discourses are they operating? Asking these and similar to these questions as a continuation of subtext strategy foregrounds the discussions of discourse in the unit, and makes sure that engaging with this type of thinking does not happen by chance is only some of the students’ work, and more importantly, does not go unnoticed by me.
Knowledge about cultural context

In many parts of different activities in the unit, especially in the “silenced character” activities, contextual knowledge proved to be crucial to the practice of problematizing the text. In order to see the invisible power relations and embedded discourses, understand the symbolic aspect of characters’ actions, and view the culture presented in the text as an independent symbolic entity with its own processes of signification and not a mere imitation of the dominant culture, my students needed, and lacked, contextual knowledge about the symbolic meanings of different elements that constitute the narrative.

Considering the noticeable increase in the depth of my students’ engagement with critical literacy practices in the process of thinking and writing about and creating artifacts for their final projects, I think practicing critical reading with texts that they are familiar with before reading texts from other cultures could have been helpful. Familiarity with the cultural context of the text helps students understand the discourses and power relations involved in the story through deciphering the culturally symbolic elements of the narrative. I believe beginning the practice of narrative critical literacy on texts that are culturally close to students’ experience would allow us to focus on the aspects of the text that most of the students missed in our engagement with *Persepolis*.

Knowledge about cultural context of the story helps students see the cultural aspect of every individual action and read the characters in the context of the limitations and affordances of their culture. Therefore, their responses to texts would be more from a cultural nature than an individual or personal nature. More students identified the symbolic and cultural meanings of characters’ actions in the activities about their choice texts than in activities about *Persepolis*. Thus, more students could see the discursive nature of the actions and their critical engagement with the text reached deeper levels of thinking and questioning the text. Familiarity with the
cultural context of their choice text allowed them to decode the signs and symbols and obtain a deeper understanding of the producer’s intents and decisions.

Beginning with a familiar text facilitates the shift in students’ view of text and characters from a personal sphere to a cultural one, which is necessary for narrative critical literacy as it sets up the platform on which critique takes place. A familiar text allows students to practice the process of making this shift. By developing this skill, their reading of multicultural texts will be more complicated and more culturally sensitive. Moreover, the importance of this practice is not limited to reading multicultural texts. By expanding these critical practices to the entire curriculum not only prepares students for critically approaching multicultural texts, but also makes them more aware of the discursive nature of their social life.

Knowledge about sociopolitical context

Identifying silenced voices and absent perspectives requires an extent of knowledge about the sociopolitical context of the text that guarantees students’ familiarity with the stakeholders of the situation discussed in the text. Comparing my students’ work on Persepolis with their work on their choice texts shows the restraints they faced while trying to identify the absent perspectives in Persepolis. Their reading of Persepolis remained limited to what was presented to them in the book, and the absent perspectives they identified remained within the plot. As they did not have the prerequisite knowledge about the sociopolitical context of this particular narrative, they could not locate it in any larger narrative and find whose voices are missing in the narrative.

Again, beginning with a familiar text narrating conflicts or tensions close to students’ experiences would help transcend this barrier. If they understand that books that represent their own culture (as a nation, as a group, as a community) often present single narratives and do not offer a complete picture of their lives and their culture, they are more likely to approach foreign texts with a critical approach. Thinking about questions of inclusion and marginalization, such as
“whose voice is included in this narrative? Whose is not? Why? Who benefits from leaving this particular perspective out? Who suffers? How are these question related to the dynamics of power?” is only accessible if the reader can situate the text and its producer in the larger context and recognize their interests and purposes. Therefore, I think texts from other cultures, as distant as Persepolis, are not the best starting points for practicing narrative critical literacy.

Providing students with opportunities to research and learn about sociopolitical context of the text at hand should have been a larger part of my unit. As explained in potential biases section in chapter 1, the authority that my nationality as an Iranian brought to my position in teaching this unit influenced the open space for conversations and activities that could have led to more contextual knowledge about Iran in 1970s. Consequently, I shied away from those conversations and partly because I was too close to the matter. Now, I think by removing myself from the conversation and making it an independent research project for students could have improved the situation to some extent.

A research project similar to the one we did with their Harlem descriptions (discussed in chapter 1) about Iran and its political climate in 1970s could have helped the students understand the narrative in its context, and identify the invisibilities and silences in its narrative. Because of the complexity of the situation and the strangeness of this particular time and place for the students (Iran in 1970s), this research project requires more expansive focus and more guidance. Hence, it might take more class time than a unit like this can possibly have to itself. Yet, teaching multicultural literature outside of its sociopolitical context falls in the trap of tokenism and increases the probability of the misunderstandings that have been discussed in last chapters.

From “silenced self”

The activities in the “silenced self” part of the unit proved to be the most productive activities of the unit in terms of intriguing critical reading and problematizing the text. The gaps and limitations in this part reflect mostly on developing narrative critical literacy as a social
action for approximating the representative dimension of social justice. By focusing on two issues revealed by my students’ work in this part, they can become more aware of the purpose of their literacy practices and approach multicultural texts of the curriculum from a more solid critical standpoint. First, I need to work more deliberately on helping students recognize the power and agentive capacity of the text in constructing readers’ social consciousness. Second, I have to facilitate their thinking and practice towards questioning the text’s representation of the world and locating the tension between the narrative and its surrounding world.

**Recognizing the power of the text**

The importance and urgency of recognizing the power of the text becomes clearer if we go back to Fraser’s idea of social justice in the globalized world we live in, and the crucial role of text and narrative in perpetuating or challenging the dynamics of power. Fraser reminds us that in our current world, “frames” function as “vehicles for injustice” (2005). This makes redefining texts as agents of maintaining or disturbing the distribution of power rather than mere reflections of the world an indispensable dimension of working towards social justice.

Therefore, I believe there should be more explicit emphasis on the significance of text in the instructions, activities, and discussions of this unit. As I have seen many times during the analysis of my students’ work, starting from examining the issues they face in their everyday life makes a great difference in the depth of their analysis of texts⁴. Exploring the political aspect of everyday interactions and the influence of texts and narrative on these micro-scale social activities provides can be a starting point for developing this understanding.

There are many ways of approaching this topic in the beginning of the unit. Here are some examples of the activities that can open the conversation about the agentive capacity of texts:

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⁴ This observation is discussed in the last section of this chapter, both in “knowledge about cultural context” and “knowledge about sociopolitical context.”
• Activities or discussions that focus on the influence of texts that students engage with on a daily basis, such as different types of social media, on the discourses through which they construct their identities and perceives others (Clothes, gestures, version of language, accessories, or any component of their everyday life that carries a symbolic meaning can be analyzed to identify the ways in which they are influenced by those texts.)

• Close reading practices on popular texts such as TV series or movies and discussing their discursive implications and the ways in which their social life is influenced by the representations of the world that those texts offer (for example, older Disney movies provide an expansive platform for analyzing discourses involving gender and sexuality).  

• Exposure to memoirs, talks, or short non-fiction essays by authors or speakers from minority groups discussing the issue of under- or mis-representation and how it affects (or has affected) their sense of self. (For example, Grace Lin shares her own experience in her Ted Talk “Windows and Mirrors of Your Child’s Bookshelf.” Watching this Ted Talk can lead into a discussion about students’ experiences with this issue.)

These and similar literacy practices provide students with skills and approaches they need to understand and experience the power of the text. They can then expand this practice beyond their own lives and apply them on narratives of Other in which they are not necessarily involved.

**Questioning text’s representation of the world: silences and invisibilities**

The importance and urgency of studying silences and invisibilities in a text was discussed in chapter four, the “text as disturber of dominant narrative” section. Not many of my students took a critical stance towards their text in terms of identifying silences and invisibilities in the

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narrative as an incomplete representation of the world. I think part of what limited their ability to critique the text was the process of choosing a text for their final project. They picked a text with which they could identify, as asked from them in the first scaffolding activity (Appendix C), and remained focused on what was presented in the text without regard to what was not.

I think some intervention by the teacher in choosing the text the students want to work on in this part of the unit would help them to approximate this goal. Although every narrative contains silences and gaps in its representation of the world, some silences are harder to identify depending on the extent to which the reader’s perspective aligns with the producer’s. I can see this in the choices my students have made in the process of producing their final projects, and the changes they have made in the texts they wanted to work on. In the beginning of our work on this project I asked the students to pick a text they can identify with, in order to make sure they are familiar with the cultural and sociopolitical context of the issue. However, this articulation of the assignment led many of them to pick texts that their authors have similar perspectives as the student. Therefore, questioning and problematizing the text became more challenging for them.

Having students begin their practice of questioning the silences and gaps of a narrative with a text that marginalizes and silences groups of people more obviously helps them focus on this component of narrative critical literacy, and understand the processes in which narratives act as agents of oppression. I would definitely include more guided practices of finding absent perspectives in the unit, and made more intervention in their choice of text to help them work with texts that allow this type of thinking more easily.

From “silenced other”

The work my students did in the “silenced other” part raises important questions about the ways in which I approached narrative critical literacy in this unit. Their responses to the reflection questions (Appendix E), discussed in chapter 5, especially those who mention the
groups in power as the absent perspective in a text produced to balance the dominant narrative, makes me question my students’ understanding of the purpose of this critical practice.

There is a list of questions that encompasses my unresolved uncertainties at the end of this unit. I was not intentional enough in addressing and discussing these questions with my students to be able to say all my students have thought about these issues:

- Where does each different narrative take us? What does each perspective tell us about the situation, and how should we construct our perception of the situation based on all these various narratives?
- As producers of texts, which perspectives and narratives should we amplify while engaging with situations and narratives that do not involve our own interests and values?
- How do we reconcile the different and sometimes contrary narratives? Or, how do we find a space for a dialogue between these narratives, and construct the hybrid narrative that is more inclusive and more just?

The importance of these questions becomes more apparent when the situation narrated in the text becomes more important, more influential, or more sensitive. Following the *Persepolis* unit, we taught a unit on the book *Night* by Elie Wiesel. Do my students understand the significance of reading about the Holocaust from the perspective of a survivor? If exposed to a narrative from the perspective of a Nazi supporter, do they know how to negotiate these narrative? Do they know what purpose each narrative pursues and how to ascribe value or importance to each? All of these questions, at their core, are tied to the questions of power and marginalization: Who has the louder voice in the ongoing conversation about the issue? Who, and how, benefits from inclusion or exclusion of certain narratives?

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The design and delivery of my unit should allocate some time and space for engaging with these questions, and with familiarizing students with the times in the history when certain narratives were silenced for the sake of the interests of the groups who have some sort of power over others. The consequences of such situations should be introduced and discussed, and the practice of identifying absent perspectives and silenced voices must be contextualized by locating it on the larger picture of representative social justice. These types of critical thinking and reading are the quintessential aspect of *narrative* critical literacy, which, I believes, affords our language art classrooms a potential for transforming the social landscape of inequality.
Appendix A

Harlem Project Assignment Sheet

English 10
Harlem Research Guide

Last week you wrote descriptive paragraphs that illustrated how you imagine Harlem to look/sound/feel like. This week, we want you to get out there and do some research about Harlem. By doing so, we will get a clearer picture of Harlem during the 1990’s (AND now).

1. By working in partners or groups, provide the class with some information about Harlem. You will have to research one of the topics below as thoroughly as you can. Please include pictures from Harlem pertaining to your topic.
   a. Demographic information (population, diversity, age, income?)
   b. Culture (arts, food, languages, again, diversity? )
   c. History (including Harlem Renaissance)
   d. Economy (business, income, etc.)
   e. Safety/Crime (statistics, detention centers, parole, police, etc.)
   f. Housing and Schools

2. The result of your research must be a presentation with a minimum of 4 slides of content shared with your partners and placed in your “Hand in” folders. Feel free to include maps, charts, or graphic diagrams if relevant. Also, be ready to talk about your results in class when we ask everyone to do so.

3. You can use any source of information that you are comfortable with. Make sure to cite the sources you have used at the end of your document.

   Here are some suggestions if you don’t know where to look at:
   - Wikipedia is usually a good place to start. (HOWEVER, Wikipedia should not be your only source. use one or two others.) Also check out neighborhood wiki project.
   - You can check this link and get ideas for researching about a neighborhood.
   - For those who are researching culture or history, this is a good resource about Harlem Renaissance
   - By doing some searching in The Official Website of the City of New York, you can find some demographic information.

Document your sources on your last slide.
Appendix B

“Silenced Voice” assignment

Persepolis Unit
Assignment number 4

On Wednesday, we talked about the moments in Persepolis when someone’s voice is silenced, or their perspective is absent. We talked about the moments when a story is told by one side, and we don’t know anything about the other side of the story.

Choose one of them and write a paragraph (at least 200 words) or create a short comic that shows the other side of the story. You can choose from the list below, or you can pursue your own idea.

- A letter from one character to another
- A character’s journal entry
- A conversation between two characters
- A short comic: a sequence of at least 3 panels

This should go on your Persepolis document, under the title: “Silenced Voice I”
Appendix C

Scaffolding Activities for the Final Project

Persepolis Unit
Assignment number 2

A story like mine

Thursday in class, you illustrated two important aspects of your identity. You have also written a reflection on a single story about yourself in the beginning of the school year. Having these two activities in mind, choose a book, a movie, a TV series, a graphic novel, etc. that tells your story. For example, if you are a football player, find a book or movie that tells the story of a football team or a football player. If you are an older sibling and this shapes an important part of your identity, find a TV series about a family and the relationships between their children. Or maybe you have had an experience that had a great impact on you and has shaped your identity in some way. Find a character that has had a similar experience in a book. You can choose your text from the movies/books you have watched/read before.

Note: From now on, we are going to call this text your ‘story’. So, whenever you see the word ‘story’ in an assignment, it is referring to your movie/novel/graphic novel/TV series/...

Write one or two paragraph(s) about your story that includes this information:
- A summary of the story
- A description of main characters
- The character to which you can relate more than others
- The reason you relate to him/her

If you cannot come up with any text that represents you, talk to your teachers about it as soon as possible. We can help you find one!

Persepolis Unit
Assignment number 3

Moment of truth

Find a moment in your story (a quote, a scene, a sequence of panels, etc.) that is also true about you or how you feel about the topic. A moment that resonates with you and you feel like the narrator is talking about you, or the character is going through what you exactly know. A moment when you can say “I have had a very similar experience” or “I have been in a similar situation” or “This sentence is exactly true about me”.

No story is perfect. There is no perspective that can give us the complete story. There is always a single story. Find a moment in your choice text that you think is not true about you. A moment when you feel like your experience is being ignored, or your voice is silenced. A moment when a stereotypical idea about you is being presented. A moment when you can say “Hey! This is not true. Not all the [...]s are like that” (you can fill the blank with “football players, teenagers, students, girls, older sisters, or whatever role that you are focusing on). You can use your single story reflection or you “just because” poem again. Does this text reinforce that single story in any moment? Does it lend itself to any other generalization?

Like last assignment, show us what you are talking about:
If it is a scene in a movie, write a short description of what is happening. Include dialogs.
If it is a quote in a book, copy it.
If it is a sequence in a graphic novel, take a picture of it and stick it here.

Then,
Write a paragraph or two about that moment. How do you feel about it? Why does it bother you? How is your experience different from what is presented in the story? What is the single story here? Whose voice is silenced?
As always, feel free to include some personal experience in your paragraph.
Appendix D

Final Project Assignment Sheet

Final project - Persepolis

Name: ____________________________

During the Persepolis unit, you have picked a text that represents one aspect of your identity (assignment number one). You have also thought and written about the stereotypes that exist about you because of that particular aspect (“Just because” poem). Then you explored your text to find the stereotypes that it presents or reinforces (assignment number 6).

For this final project, you will create a text that dispels (dismisses) those stereotypes and shows the incompleteness of those single stories. This project is going to be both fun and informative. You will learn to criticize a text and advocate for yourself through the process.

You can choose the format of your text from the list below, or you can make something different. However you choose to create your project, it has to include a visual part.

- A video clip (2-3 minutes)
- A poster
- A comic
- ...

On Friday, February 26, you will show us the checklist we provided you, demonstrating significant progress, meaning that you are nearing completion, on the items below. You, your peers and your teachers can workshop for a time to enhance or put finishing touches on the final product.

You will turn in your final project next Tuesday, March 1.

Your final products should include:

- An introduction (in any format) that explains what stereotype you want to dispel (3 points).
- At least ONE piece of evidence that shows these stereotypes exist in your first text. You can use a quote, the description of a scene, a screenshot of a comment/post if your text is an account on social media, or any other data that supports your idea (5 points).
• At least TWO pieces of evidence that shows those stereotypes are not necessarily true (**10 points**).
  For example:
  • Interview people who share that part of your identity with you, and use their answers.
  • Find or take pictures that show other sides of story.
  • Find or make video clips that show other sides of story.
  • Find articles that support your idea about this stereotype.
  • Show your own personal experience in a tangible format.

• A conclusion: An analysis on how these pieces of evidence dispel the stereotype or single story (**5 points**).

• You will also turn in your planning sheet and your checklist (**7 points**).
Appendix E

Reflection on Final Projects

Persepolis final project reflection  Name:

Your final projects are all shaped around one or several stereotypes. As Chimamanda Adichie states in her TedTalk, stereotypes are results of a single story. Also, as we know by now, each single story is created when someone’s voice is silenced or, in other words, someone’s perspective is absent. In your projects, you prove that stereotypes are incomplete by giving voice to someone who has not had the chance to be heard.

1. Who are the people you give voice to in your project?

2. On a scale of 0-5, how do you rate your success in dismissing the stereotypes you address? (0 = completely unsuccessful, 5= completely successful) 1 2 3 4 5

   Explain the reason behind your rating:

3. Whose perspective is absent even in your project?

4. Is there anything you wanted to add to your project but you couldn’t add for any reason? (Lack of time/ lack of resources/ ...)

5. What is one thing that you learned while doing this project?

On the back of this page, please answer the questions about two other projects presented today. You can revisit the projects if you need.

Project #1:
Creator’s name: 

1. Who is given a voice in this project?
2. On a scale of 0-5, how do you rate this project’s success in dismissing the stereotypes it addresses? (0 = completely unsuccessful, 5 = completely successful) 1 2 3 4 5
   Explain the reason behind your rating:

3. Whose perspective is absent even in this project?
Bibliography


