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## Culturally Responsive Language Arts Teaching: Refiguring Curriculum with Counternarratives

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# Culturally Responsive Language Arts Teaching: Refiguring Curriculum with Counternarratives

CLAIRE A. BREIHZOLZ AND REBECCA SMITH

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) provides a framework from which teachers can plan, teach, and grow in their own practice as antiracist educators. CRT accurately represents the contributions of people of color, in addition to the challenges of poverty, race relations, and social problems, so that students “understand the realities of the social condition and how they came to be” (Gay, 2015, p. 214). Furthermore, Hammond’s (2014) culturally responsive teaching framework includes: a) awareness of our cultural lenses and the socio-political context of race; b) developing learning partnerships between student and teacher; c) providing students opportunities for processing information, such as diverse curriculum that connects to their lives and communities; and d) creating a safe learning community. In this article, we understand culturally responsive teaching as a combination of beliefs, attitudes, and teaching practices that inform how teachers design and implement curriculum.

The purpose of this paper is to provide secondary language arts educators with practical tools for implementing culturally responsive practices into their classrooms. We advocate for teachers to recognize their power in diversifying curriculum, focusing on three key methods, including updating canonical texts, utilizing texts with diverse English vernaculars, and honoring counternarratives. We introduce a sample unit that utilizes a Herstory approach to teaching historical fiction, which exemplifies the use of counternarratives, particularly the voices of women in the novel *In the Time of the Butterflies* by Julia Alvarez. We end with guiding questions for educators committed to infusing diversity into their practice. We argue that culturally responsive teachers must refigure their worlds in order to bring the voices from the margins into the curriculum.

## English Language Arts Teachers as Gatekeepers

It is widely accepted that teachers have tremendous power to influence their students’ understanding and perception of the world. While there are numerous social, political, and parental pressures that influence the material that will be taught to K-12 students, the teacher is ultimately the conduit for engaging students with content. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) defines the types of skills and knowledge that students should obtain at their grade level, and yet English Language Arts (ELA) teachers are the *gatekeepers* of the literature and story selections that pass their students’ desk (Hartsfield & Kimmel, 2020). Essentially, the teacher’s position as gatekeeper gives them the power to either censor or diversify the curriculum.

With the majority of the teaching force in the U.S. identifying as white (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020), it is essential that these educators engage in critical self-reflection about how their racial identities and lived experiences impact the curricula they choose. Hartsfield and Kimmel (2020) emphasize *figured worlds* that influence how a teacher maintains her gate. These figured worlds are the assumptions that teachers create about their students, their communities, and their curriculum. Figured worlds often cause teachers to censor curriculum. A culturally responsive educator will critically reflect on how her own cultural lens impacts curricular choices.

Beyond the CCSS, how do ELA teachers decide what to teach? Watkins and Ostenson (2015) found that some teachers identified *tradition* as a factor in their text selection. These teachers felt bound by what they are *supposed* to teach based on district precedent or Advanced Placement curriculum suggestions. It is important to note that these traditional text choices are often written by and for white audiences (Watkins & Ostenson, 2015). If teachers are the gatekeepers

to the literature their students access, the teacher's figured world may prevent students from reading more culturally and linguistically diverse texts.

The notion of teachers as gatekeepers (Hartsfield & Kimmel, 2020) inspired us to examine how teachers who are committed to being culturally responsive, no matter their own diverse and intersectional identities, can actually refigure their curriculum to make it more responsive to the rich diversity in their classrooms and the world. How can white teachers and teachers of color decenter whiteness in their curriculum and honor counternarratives? This paper proposes methods for curriculum reform of both traditional canonical texts and texts that integrate more diverse perspectives. We offer a sample unit plan framework for teachers to use as a model for refiguring curriculum to better meet the needs of all students.

### Preparing Culturally Responsive ELA Educators

The path to culturally responsive teaching must begin with the preparation of preservice teachers and continue on with inservice teachers. There are several methods for preparing preservice teachers to be culturally responsive. One method for teacher educators to consider is having critical discussions about literature with preservice teachers. These discussions should center around literature that focuses on "diverse, urban, and multicultural perspectives" (Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013, p. 247). In fact, Dover (2016) found that justice-oriented secondary ELA teachers who addressed complex social justice issues like racism and sexism had a high potential for addressing higher-level learning standards. For preservice teachers who struggle to incorporate higher-level learning standards, social justice topics can be a starting place; social justice topics—like systematic racism—require critical thinking skills because they do not have easy answers or quick fixes. Plus, social justice topics are culturally responsive, as they relate to every student's life or community in some capacity (Dover, 2016). Social justice themes can also be found in multicultural literature.

An additional method for preparing preservice teachers is to expose them to critical topics through the use of book clubs or reading groups. Eisenbach et al.'s (2018) research explored how the young adult (YA) novel *All American Boys* could teach students in a YA literature course for preservice teachers about race and racial injustice. Critical reading groups among preservice teachers can also help grow teacher understandings

of diversity and multicultural curricula. Sample texts to engage in literature through an LGBTQ+ lens include: *He Forgot to Say Goodbye* by Benjamin Alire Sáenz, *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* by Kirstin Cronn-Mills, *I'll Give You the Sun* by Jandy Nelson, *Every Day* by David Levithan, *Fangirl* by Rainbow Rowell, and *More Happy Than Not* by Adam Silvera. Additional YA texts that draw awareness to the voices of students with disabilities are *Wonder* by R. J. Palacio and *Mockingbird* by Kathryn Erskine, which is about a girl with Asperger's. Falter and Kerkoff (2018) conclude in their research that student identity development is supported when content is both relatable and diverse and when it is paired with critical theories of race and gender. The voices on the margins of society must be heard in our mainstream ELA classrooms and schools.

### Diversifying ELA Curriculum

Whether or not teachers join the teaching force with a culturally responsive lens to their pedagogical practice, they need to critically analyze who, what, and how ELA curriculum is taught; this critical reflection is at the core of becoming a culturally responsive educator. ELA is known for its over representation of white, male voices in the canon. This primarily white, Euro-centric canon is inadvertently supported by the Common Core, which provides a text exemplar list for educators (Shieble, 2013). Teaching this list of texts is not mandated, but as many teachers are pressured to achieve high standardized test results, districts and teachers often choose authors from the text exemplar list as they anticipate test questions that draw on these authors' work (Shieble, 2013).

However, this traditional canon hardly represents the multicultural reality of the United States' student population. In order for teachers to effectively incorporate multicultural literature, they must have "knowledge about the students' culture and identity" (Christ & Sharma, 2018, p. 63). This knowledge should be cultivated through continued professional development where teachers are supported in learning about student identities and then supported in their pedagogical development and implementation.

### Update Canonical Texts

One method for diversifying the curriculum is integrating modern texts with similar themes or genres in lieu

of traditional classics. For instance, the creator of the popular Secondary English Coffeeshop blog (Hall, 2015) recommends rethinking the classics often found on text exemplar lists, so teachers can implement a culturally responsive and modern literature selection. In essence, this blog recommends that for each classic text, teachers should identify the key takeaway ideas, themes, and standards and then select a text that amplifies marginalized voices while still meeting the same unit goals as the classics. For instance, canonized texts like *The Odyssey* can be updated with modern epics like Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*. This modern epic would still help teachers reach the standards that are often matched with *The Odyssey* like studying figurative language. Furthermore, researchers McBean and Johnston (2018) suggest Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* as a vehicle for social justice teaching. A coming of age text like *Purple Hibiscus* can easily achieve similar aims set out by traditional coming of age stories like *Catcher in the Rye* or *Jane Eyre*—both of which are authored by white individuals. While the canon may still provide relevant themes to help students understand the world today, there are multicultural texts that offer parallel learning outcomes through voices that have been silenced for too long.

### Utilize Diverse Language in Literature Choices

Another method for diversifying ELA curriculum that can help students better understand the English language is choosing texts that demonstrate various forms of English vernaculars. The diverse exposition of the English language is paramount, as students are as diverse in race and gender as they are in their languages (Devereaux, 2012). While teaching writing and reading of Standard English is privileged in ELA, reading and understanding vernacular texts can help students anticipate and celebrate the diversity of the English language (Devereaux, 2012). This exposure helps students deconstruct the notion that English takes one form. Devereaux points specifically to *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Black author Zora Neale Hurston as a text with vernacular variety which also supports student identity development where students can see the diversity of the world mirrored in literature.

### Use Herstory to Develop Counternarratives

One innovative method of integrating culturally responsive teaching into the ELA classroom is through

the use of *Herstory*. Herstory refers to the reimagining and retelling of history from a feminist perspective in which women's experiences and points of view are privileged (Empower Women, 2016). For our purposes, the definition of Herstory will be extended to the act of reforming the stories we tell about the reality of the human experience to include the unique experiences of women. Often the history students learn is told from the perspective of those who hold power (e.g., the *his* in history), much like the canonical literature mentioned previously: white men. By centering a unit with Herstory, teachers can use counternarratives to help students reimagine their conceptions of the world.

### Designing a Herstory Unit

We have chosen Dominican author Julia Alvarez's (1994) *In the Time of the Butterflies* as the perfect platform to provide a sample Herstory unit. We encourage teachers to utilize the Unit Plan Framework in Table 1 to design similar culturally responsive units. Alvarez's historical fiction novel follows the Mirabel sisters—real life Dominican activists—who worked to undermine and overthrow Rafael Trujillo's brutal dictatorship in the Dominican Republic (DR) in the mid-twentieth century. This reimagining of the Mirabel sisters and the tragic historical events in the DR under Trujillo's rule demonstrates how women are also essential players in political revolutions, even when they are often left out of revolutionary narratives. In order for this unit to integrate a culturally responsive lens, teachers should connect ideas from the text to cultural events that will resonate with their students; thus, this unit plan should be adjusted to meet the needs of each community. See Table 1 for a Herstory Unit Plan Template for *In the Time of the Butterflies*.

### Refiguring History Through Characterization

The Herstory unit on *In the Time of the Butterflies* serves as the foundation for students to recognize the voices that are missing in mainstream history. For instance, if students did a quick Wikipedia search to get basic information about Trujillo, the Dominican dictator during the time of the novel, there is almost no information about any women other than his mother or his wives. Digging a bit deeper into *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2020) or the *History Channel* (2020) online will further leave you void of any reference to women at all in their summaries of Trujillo's 30-year rule, with the

<b>Table 1</b>	
<i>Herstory Unit Plan In the Time of the Butterflies (Template Modified from Mirra, 2018)</i>	
<b>Essential Question(s)/Enduring Understanding(s)</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· What is the role of literature in building our understanding of her/historical events?</li> <li>· How can readers use fiction to supplement her/historical teachings?</li> <li>· How does reading with a feminist lens change our perception of her/history?</li> <li>· Why are women often left out of revolutionary narratives?</li> </ul>	
<b>Common Core State Standard(s)</b>	
Reading Writing Speaking /Listening Language	
<b>CCSS</b>	
Reading: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail</li> <li>· Analyze author’s structure and its effect on the understanding of the text</li> <li>· Analyze how an author draws on and transforms source material in a specific work</li> </ul> Writing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Develop the topic with well-chosen, relevant, and sufficient facts, extended definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information to meet the needs of the audience</li> <li>· Use technology to produce, publish, and update writing products</li> <li>· Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research</li> <li>· Make strategic use of digital media in presentations</li> <li>· Acquire and correctly use academic language</li> <li>· Acquire and use accurately general academic and domain-specific words and phrases at the college and career readiness level</li> </ul>	
<b>Herstory Focus</b>	
Students will read <i>In the Time of the Butterflies</i> with a feminist lens. This critical review of literature will help students identify and understand the role of women throughout history and can connect to additional historical movements of which women play key roles, such as the women’s suffrage movement, the Civil Rights Movement, #Metoo, Black Lives Matter (BLM), Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), mothers in Mexico protesting the disappearance of children, and Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW).	
<b>Summative Assessment(s)</b>	
Real-World Topics: Students will design a multimedia presentation using PowerPoint, Slides, Prezi, or another platform to reimagine a Latin American event through Herstory. Students will conduct research on an event, and then use a feminist perspective to build a nuanced depiction. Essentially, students will rewrite history to create a Herstory counternarrative. A list of possible events will be provided, but students will not be limited to these events. The summative assessment will help students see how easily history has been manipulated to favor the colonizing, the wealthy, and the powerful nations and individuals.	

Table 1 (con't)	
Text Set	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Fiction (novels, short stories, poems, drama): <i>In the Time of the Butterflies</i></li> <li>· Nonfiction (newspaper/magazine/blog articles, speeches, informational texts):</li> <li>· Timeline of US-Latin American relations</li> <li>· Historical Documents US-Latin American policy from U.S. Department of State</li> <li>· Timeline of Acts of US Aggression in Latin America from Veterans for Peace</li> <li>· Multimedia (film clips, online content, podcasts):</li> <li>· US-Mexico Migrant Crisis Video from Global News</li> <li>· Authors (diversity of gender, race, age, country of origin, ability status, sexual orientation): Julia Alvarez (female, Dominican author)</li> </ul>	
What do students need to know and be able to do in order to successfully complete the summative assessment?	
Content	Skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Latin American and US relations</li> <li>· Dominican Republic politics (Trujillo regime)</li> <li>· Herstory framework</li> <li>· Feminist theory</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Read and analyze a complex text (understand and identify figurative language, study effects of multiple points of view)</li> <li>· Choose relevant evidence</li> <li>· Conduct sustained research</li> <li>· Locate reliable sources online</li> <li>· Use multimedia platforms to display information</li> </ul>

content summary of his life entailing: Early Years, Absolute Power, Parsley Massacre, Era Ends (History.com Editors, 2020). It is only when seeking out research articles (i.e., Derby, 2000; Manley, 2012) that you will find the counternarratives that we advocate for integrating in high school ELA courses. These articles highlight the stories of female activists who resisted Trujillo’s brutal dictatorship. Culturally responsive teachers can help students learn how to dig deeper to find the hidden narratives.

Given how quickly people—in particular, our students—can access information in the Digital Age, it is imperative that teachers help their students constantly reassess information that they are fed from books, television, and websites like Wikipedia. Importantly, *In the Time of the Butterflies* does not paint Trujillo as a generally oppressive dictator like his Wikipedia page, but instead portrays a more holistic story of Trujillo, both as an oppressive dictator and a predatory figure. In an interview about the book (Interview, 2004), Julia Alvarez, who lived through the Trujillo regime before relocating to the United States, described the Trujillo era of the 1950s as a time where “telling stories was a dangerous activity” (para. 2). She further described the beauty and power of retelling history through the eyes of different characters:

One of the things that happens in a dictatorship is that

there is only one “official story” recorded, everything else is protectively oral and vanishes when the source is murdered and disappeared. Some of those sources had survived, and of course, I interviewed them, including the one remaining sister (of the four Mirabal sisters), Dedé Mirabal. I soon learned that even among these sources there were varying versions of what “really” happened. History, I was learning, is the story we tell ourselves about what really happened. My task as a writer/novelist was to try to get as many versions of that reality and then imaginatively construct the story. The fact that there were so many versions of what really happened should not surprise us: After all, we experience history as individuals through our particular characters, personalities, points of view. This reality of how we live history ideally suits the form of a novel, which focuses on “the truth according to character.” (para. 4)

As such, Alvarez’s book, effectively *her* Herstory, paints a more accurate picture of the challenges for women living under the Trujillo regime.

This unit encourages students to reimagine history by supplementing it with fiction. Considering how much is actually left out of our historical consciousness, it is important that students start to see how similar history and fiction really

are. By building a nuanced understanding of a real event to include the experiences of revolutionary women, students are practicing being critical consumers of information. In order to create a more just world, teachers, as gatekeepers of the curriculum, have an obligation to help their students see the world in new and innovative ways.

### Further Diversifying the Curriculum

In addition to *In the Time of the Butterflies*, there are further contemporary and canonical novels that support a Herstory and counternarrative approach to ELA, represented in Table 2.

#### Designing a Herstory Unit Within the Traditional Canon

Ideally, culturally responsive teachers would adjust their curriculum in conversation with current events, such as a lesson on debunking conspiracy theories when teaching about reliable research resources; yet, we recognize there are constraints on teachers' time and resources that could prevent constant curricular renovation. However, many existing canonical texts provide an opportunity for teachers to engage students in culturally responsive units where counternarratives are at the center of analysis. Teachers can use the following questions to develop counternarrative units, assist students in becoming "text detectives" (Smith et al., 2017, p. 61), and bring social justice to the focus of a unit that uses a traditional

text:

- Whose voices and values are being heard? Whose voices are missing?
- What is the role of women in this narrative? Do women have their own voices and opinions? Are women independent from male characters?
- How does the author's gender, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status impact how they portray women?
- Where can we examine intersectionality in the text to build a nuanced meaning?
- Whose version of history are we drawing from?
- What would it look like if this narrative was told from a different point of view? From a woman? From a working class individual?

The goal of these questions is to decenter the traditional reading of a text. For instance, let's consider Homer's *The Odyssey*, which is widely taught in high school ELA. Traditionally, *The Odyssey* is taught as an introduction to literature. Teachers focus on Odysseus' archetypal hero's journey as he travels back from Troy to Ithaca. They may also teach students about Greek gods and goddesses to build their background knowledge for allusions they will later approach in literature. While this approach is adequate in the sense that it builds a student's literary foundation, it lacks a meaningful culturally responsive approach. Instead, what if the teacher approached the text with questions that bring women to the

Contemporary and Canonical Novels	Short Stories
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· <i>Homegoing</i>, Yaa Gyasi (2016)</li> <li>· <i>Beloved</i>, Toni Morrison (1987)</li> <li>· <i>Americanah</i>, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2013)</li> <li>· <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i>, Margaret Atwood (1985)</li> <li>· <i>Annie John</i>, Jamaica Kincaid (1985)</li> <li>· <i>The House on Mango Street</i>, Sandra Cisneros (1983)</li> <li>· <i>When the Emperor was Divine</i>, Julie Ostuka (2002)</li> <li>· <i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i>, Zora Neale Hurston (1937)</li> <li>· <i>Ceremony</i>, Leslie Marmon Silko (1977)</li> <li>· <i>Fun Home</i>, Alison Bechdel (2006)</li> <li>· <i>Second Class Citizen</i>, Emecheta Buchi (1974)</li> <li>· <i>Passing</i>, Nella Larson (1929)</li> <li>· <i>Persepolis</i>, Marjane Satrapi (2000)</li> <li>· <i>The Color Purple</i>, Alice Walker (1982)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· "How to be Chinese," Celeste Ng (2014)</li> <li>· "Names/Nombres," Julia Alvarez (1985)</li> <li>· "Sweetness," Toni Morrison (2015)</li> <li>· "Everyday Use," Alice Walker (1973)</li> <li>· "The Story of an Hour," Kate Chopin (1894)</li> <li>· "Two Kinds," Amy Tan (1989)</li> <li>· "Drenched in the Light," Zora Neale Hurston (1924)</li> </ul>
	Poetry
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· "Girl," Jamaica Kincaid (1978)</li> <li>· "Power," Audre Lorde (1978)</li> <li>· "Mirror," Sylvia Plath (1971)</li> <li>· "Still I Rise," Maya Angelou (1978)</li> </ul>

forefront of the text? To connect Herstory to *The Odyssey*, teachers can ask: How does Homer portray Penelope? What is problematic about the double standard for males and females in terms of infidelity? How would the story be different if women were part of the revolution, the government, the Battle of Troy? How are the “others” (Sirens, cyclops, women) treated? Whose understanding of Greek history informs the authoring of this text? These questions aim to decenter Homer’s white, male perspective by building a more complex reading. This approach actively constructs a counternarrative to help students rethink mainstream literary stories.

### Call to Action

To address our diverse student populations, it is essential for teachers to engage their students with culturally responsive teaching practices. Because teachers are gatekeepers of curriculum, they have an obligation to choose diverse texts that reflect the experiences and honor the voices of their students and their students’ communities. As such, teachers should develop a critical canon that prioritizes counterstory telling and Herstories. This critical canon should be rich in diversity and refigure the traditional white canon.

This call to action is urgent and real, as state legislatures seek to block an integration of diversity into the curriculum. For instance, Idaho recently passed a bill that bans educators from teaching critical race theory, and numerous states appear to have similar bills in the pipeline (O’Kane, 2021). Additionally, lawmakers are pushing to ban the 1619 Project from schools, which is a curriculum that focuses on the legacy of slavery and the contributions of African Americans (Schwartz, 2021). The censorship of counternarratives, particularly the perspectives of people of color, perpetuates the exclusion of voices from the margins who are already too frequently missing from the curriculum. We are not calling for the current canon to be abandoned, but instead, we are asking educators to think of the canon as flexible and organic; our text choices should adapt to everchanging current events and community needs. This culturally responsive approach to ELA will help education become more inclusive, antiracist, and nuanced, which is exactly what our students need in a time that is so divisive.

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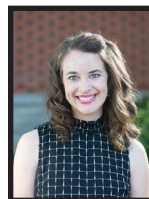
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