Richard Wright once said that “all literature is a protest.” For centuries, authors have written in a wide array of genres to affect their readers—to help them reflect on societal ills, to make them aware of critical issues—with the ultimate goal of creating change. Nonfiction, including articles, essays, and memoirs, has a particular power in that these genres reveal multiple histories, narratives, perspectives, and truths. These texts, while now mandated by the Common Core, can be used in compelling ways to inspire students so they can explore how writers use language to move people to make a difference. Furthermore, students can use texts as models, so they too can construct creative, nonfiction pieces with the purpose of creating change within their communities.

Considering the current climate, particularly in light of Ferguson, Baltimore, and other recent police brutality protests, it becomes critical for teachers to include current social issues surrounding such topics as violence, racism, and poverty. Teachers can address these concerns through the use of students’ voices and lived experiences and through the use of nonfiction that explicitly addresses these problems. Ernest Morrell, Hilary Janks, Jesse Gainer, and other critical literacy researchers and practitioners urge teachers to integrate current and relevant topics into the classroom as a way to engage students and build their academic literacy. Specifically, by exploring nonfiction, not only do we prepare students for challenging reading, but we also offer them genres that protest injustices, so that we can reveal to students a critical purpose in both their reading and writing.

The goal of this article is first and foremost about practice, in that I will highlight a unit I taught using nonfiction that centered on how reading and writing can be used to address issues of social justice and change. In doing so, I will provide pedagogical tools and strategies that help students to analyze and synthesize multiple nonfiction texts while simultaneously learning more about historical circumstances and injustices, particularly how they are interconnected. In addition to these critical thinking and reading goals, I expose students to various modes of nonfiction creative writing, so that students use mentor texts as models to experiment with new genres.

Context
I initially introduced this unit plan with tenth-grade English students in a small New York City public high school. During the time of data collection, the school had 400 students, of which 81 percent qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. My classroom of 26 students ethnically represented the school’s statistics of approximately 60 percent Latino/Latina and 40 percent African American, with an equal number of boys to girls. Of these 26 students, nine received supplemental services as they had special needs and three were English language learners.

Framing the Unit within Critical, Diverse Nonfiction Texts
Nonfiction is a powerful genre in which teachers and students can apply a critical lens to the texts,
Using Nonfiction to Advocate for Change

current and historical events, and our own lived communities. Critical literacy asks students to explore the relationships between power and domination—to unpack the “socially constructed meaning embedded in texts as well as the political and economic contexts in which texts are embedded” (Morrell 73). Because one of the goals for critical literacy is transformation, my overarching essential question for the protest unit plan was “How do authors inspire change through their writing?” Using Wright’s quotation that literature is about protest, I selected two core nonfiction texts to unpack this statement, so students could see the power of the authors’ writing. Using nonfiction is essential in all of our classrooms. As teachers of literacy, we have a responsibility to develop students’ “textual repertoires” so we expose them to a variety of genres (Olsen 149). Nonfiction is not only a genre that students encounter frequently, but it is also a genre they enjoy, as my students were often drawn to the nonfiction in our independent reading library; they requested and read texts that were expository and autobiographical, often asking for “drama” and real-life, “true” stories.

Keeping in mind two important factors—my students’ interests and the demands of the upcoming standardized test (specifically in Global History)—I selected two primary texts: Night by Elie Wiesel and Fires in the Mirror by Anna Devere Smith. Night is a poignant memoir about the life of Wiesel during the Holocaust, while Fires in the Mirror provides students with a unique example of nonfiction as it captures several diverse voices in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. In the 1990s, riots erupted between Hasidic Jews and the African and Caribbean Americans who lived side by side in a small neighborhood. After a Jewish man killed a young African American boy, the African and Caribbean American community took to the streets, calling for justice. During this struggle, one Jewish man was killed. Smith interviewed dozens of community members—from Hasidic Jewish women to African American activists to such leaders as Al Sharpton. She transcribed these interviews and created a nonfiction, multigenre dramatic play; she also performed each of these scripts, seamlessly portraying in a one-woman show a variety of voices, perspectives, and experiences.

I supplemented these two works with other nonfiction texts, including articles about nationwide historical protests (from the Civil Rights Movement to the Los Angeles riots), photographs from the protests and the Holocaust, political cartoons, primary documents, and the film version of Fires in the Mirror. (I highly recommend beginning the unit with more current nonfiction texts as well, particularly those surrounding the deaths of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown and the protests that followed.)

By using a variety of nonfiction, specifically culturally relevant texts, I can help students raise questions about how they understand difference and conflict in their own worldviews and of those in their communities. Culturally relevant texts are those that represent and respond to students’ interests and cultural identities and communities (Gay 108). In addition to enriching our traditional use of the canon, these texts help “level the playing field between mainstream students and students of other cultural backgrounds” (Olsen 156) while empowering “students of culturally diverse backgrounds by enabling them to see themselves reflected in the literature that they study” (157). Our two texts accomplished these goals: Fires in the Mirror reflected the voices of our students’ communities, particularly for our African American students. And because none of our students were Jewish, Wiesel’s memoir gave them a perspective that was different from their own. Before reading these texts, I also asked students how they believed authors could inspire and promote change within our communities.

Below are two sample responses:

John: By speaking the truth, talking about what’s happening, what’s gonna happen, and what should happen . . . like changing people’s actions on racism like in the “Bluest Eye,” all that racism drove that little girl crazy which can also happen in real life.

Susan: Authors inspire change by writing something powerful, truthful and with a message. It has to be something they know about/are passionate about because if they wish to change it, it will show their writing. I also believe it should be relative because then people look within themselves or the world and realize that things need to be changed. For example, the film about honor killings that
These responses demonstrate that students had a clear understanding of how writing can be used as a tool for social justice, specifically citing other texts we had read or watched in class. A critical next step was to collect more samples of this kind of work: Over the weekend, students gathered evidence of protest writing in their own community, bringing in photographs of graffiti and online tweets. These were shared with the class and posted in our classroom. I suggest also reading with students a recent article by Ernie Suggs on the power of social media to promote change. (This text is offered on newsela.com at various grade levels so as to differentiate the reading for special needs students, struggling readers, and/or English language learners.)

**Unpacking Protest through *Fires in the Mirror***

Framing the unit plan with current events is critical in understanding the historical complexities of the Crown Heights disputes revealed in *Fires in the Mirror*. To accomplish this, I activated students’ prior knowledge by asking them what they know about Crown Heights, Brooklyn. I wrote on the board their ideas, providing a minilesson on the differences between evidence and inferences. In this way, I integrated a critical reading strategy aligned with the Common Core while simultaneously discussing an important historical moment within our community. As a whole class, we read aloud and took notes on a *New York Times* article titled “A Boy’s Death Ignites Clashes in Crown Heights” (Kifner) so as to build their background knowledge before beginning the nonfiction play. I provided them with a review of three-column notes that are used in their global history classes. The columns were *Main Ideas, Evidence, and Inferences*, and we discussed the differences among these. In addition to reading the article, students looked at photographs from the protests. Many noted, and were upset by, the fact that only African Americans were represented in these pictures, despite the equal presence of the white Jewish community in these disputes. Powerful connections can be made between these photographs and those that were taken during the Ferguson and Baltimore protests. Several articles can be shared with students that provide political commentaries on how the media portrays African Americans in times of protest (see sidebar for resources).

After building background knowledge and creating critical connections to the students’ current lived experiences, students previewed *Fires in the Mirror*. As this was a new genre, we made note of formatting and content. Using a similar note-taking system, I modeled a variation on three-column notes using the headings *Character/Title, Evidence, and Inferences*. Using the first monologue, I modeled how to use this strategy and checked for understanding. I then read the second monologue aloud, and students practiced this strategy individually, thus providing scaffolding for students. Finally, students previewed the remaining characters in the text. They wrote down three preferences for the character they would like to analyze and enact, as I wanted students to build their fluency and develop their reading voices, and also work on their critical reading skills.

Once students were assigned characters, they read the monologues individually and responded to the following questions: “What is the message? Why do you think Smith included this voice?” Below is Kendra’s analysis of Angela Davis’s monologue:

> Davis is trying to say that back in her day there wasn’t chances for African Americans to rise above oppression. She’s saying that race has been used to construct communities in an unfair way b/c it cannot be changed; we are born with our race. She says that European colonists, in order to be powerful and colonize, they had to divide people into communities and that’s when it all started. She puts the word race in quotes b/c she feels to end this division, we need to change how we think we are different/divided by race. We need to not put ourselves into confined spaces/communities.

Kendra’s response to this monologue shows her understanding of Davis’s words, and she critically analyzes the message that Davis portrays to her audience.

Once students analyzed their passages, they met with a partner to practice their monologues, working on where to pause, words to emphasize, and pronunciation. For the next few days, students read their monologues aloud while others followed along in the book and took notes on any powerful
statements they felt represented a moment of protest. Figure 1 is a sample response from Andre.

Once we finished reading *Fires in the Mirror*, I showed students the film. The opening prompt before watching the film was “What were the primary causes of the riots? (A group of people, a single person or an institution) Support your evidence from the film or text.” Students then selected five characters who supported their argument. Using two-column notes they tracked the following: Name of Person and What did he/she say that supports your argument? These notes were later used for an informal argumentative writing paragraph where students persuaded their audience on how to resolve the racial divide in Crown Heights.

**Critical and Creative Writing: What Does It Mean to Be a Witness?**

While students worked on note taking and argumentative writing, I also wanted them to develop their own creative writing texts. Using Smith’s work as a mentor text (Gallagher 28), students interviewed a person about a critical historical moment in their lives: something a person in their community had witnessed. We discussed the notion of “witness” as a way to critically unpack the ideas around perspective and voice. Students studied the ways in which Smith broke up her interviews, studying where the lines ended and analyzing the effects of those decisions. Students then transcribed their interviews and formatted their texts aesthetically, later reflecting in writing how and why they made the choices they did, focusing on the Common Core standard of author’s craft. Figure 2 is a sample of Daphne’s work. Daphne’s piece clearly represents how she was able to use Smith’s genre as a model for her own creative writing. Trying on different types of writing is empowering for students so they can see how different formats and genres can inspire people within our communities and provide voice to their own unique perspectives.

**Understanding Memoir and the Holocaust through Elie Wiesel’s *Night***

Memoirs are powerful for students as they reveal the stories and experiences of real people. *Fires in the Mirror* prepared students to enter Elie Wiesel’s world, in that they were eager to understand the roots of anti-Semitism. To activate prior knowledge
about the Holocaust, students worked with partners to generate a list of everything they knew, which was later shared with the class. I also provided students with other examples of nonfiction, including political cartoons, primary documents, and maps. Figure 3 is one example of the political cartoons used for Nazi propaganda. Students critically “viewed” and analyzed these images, responding to the following prompt: “Examine the political cartoons. Choose one and explain its message. What can you infer from the image? How might these images influence people? What does the image say about Jewish people?” In studying political cartoons, students’ historical knowledge was deepened in addition to their critical reading skills. This type of critical media literacy encourages students to “consider why messages are sent and where they come from” so they can interrogate multiple genres and images that often reproduce racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, and other prejudices (Gainer 365).

The first day of reading Night, I explained that, like with Smith’s nonfiction play, we would track how Wiesel used memoir to inspire change, specifically looking at his writing style. After providing a minilesson on theme, symbolism, conflict, and moral dilemma, students discussed examples of each of these from Fires in the Mirror. Themes that students created included the following:

- Stereotypes lead to racism and often hateful acts.
- Not taking responsibility for one’s actions can lead to violence.
- When people are different, debates arise and often go unresolved without dialogue.
- Religion and ethnicity make up one’s identity and have powerful effects on the ways in which we interact within various communities.

In terms of symbols, students wrote about and discussed swastikas (anti-Semitism), Mexican standoffs (debates and fighting), and mirrors (reflection and distortion). Finally, the conflicts that students identified were numerous, including rioting, violence, manipulation of facts, portrayals of African Americans in the media, and racism. Students recorded their thoughts on a graphic organizer (see Figure 4).

**FIGURE 3. Sample Symbol**

**FIGURE 4. Graphic Organizer**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fires in the Mirror</th>
<th>Night</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Examples of Themes</strong></td>
<td><strong>Examples of Themes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stereotypes can lead to racism.</td>
<td>Loss of faith results from helplessness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s easier to blame others, than look at yourself.</td>
<td>Traumatizing experiences stay with people forever.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity = identity</td>
<td>Survival at all costs = loss of humanity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When people are too anchored in their communities, it’s hard for them to accept others of different communities.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Examples of Symbols</strong></td>
<td><strong>Examples of Symbols</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hair = identity</td>
<td>Violin = Juliek’s life, corpse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fire = rage</td>
<td>Ghetto = captivity, isolation, separation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mirror = both sides of story; judgment; distortion</td>
<td>Fire = anger, rage, fear, chaos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anchor (Angela Davis) = community movement into communities</td>
<td>Soup = survival, protection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conflicts/Moral Dilemmas</strong></td>
<td><strong>Conflicts/Moral Dilemmas</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish ambulance helped the rabbi before the little boy.</td>
<td>Kill yourself or be killed/murdered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riots: fighting for rights vs. destruction</td>
<td>Father vs. hunger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mrs. Schacter was beaten for screaming</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Once we completed the left-hand side of the organizer, students were ready to read Night, using a similar lens to make connections between the two texts.

Critical Argument as a Summative Assessment

The final essay for this unit was for students to construct an argument about how both Smith and Wiesel used their writing and/or performance to promote change. One way I prepared students for this task was to have them write one informal argument a week that was not evaluated. Carol Booth Olsen explains, “Because we do not want students to perceive writing as a chore that one does simply to appease the teacher, it is also important to engage students in expressive writing that is not evaluated by the teacher—and sometimes to let students have a say regarding what piece or pieces of their writing will be submitted for evaluation” (195). These “flash drafts” not only engaged students with the reading in a critical way, it provided them with practice in the genre of argument itself. I also offered students several choices, which increased their motivation to write:

- What is Anna Deavere Smith saying about being a “witness” to an event?
- What are some of the symbols in Fires in the Mirror/Night and what do they represent? What symbols are the same? How do they connect?
- What are some of the recurring themes that occur in Fires in the Mirror/Night? Why are they important? Which ones are the same? How do they connect?
- How, if at all, can two completely different communities peacefully occupy the same space?
- Loss of Innocence: How is innocence lost in either text?
- Loss of Faith: How is faith lost in either text?
- What moral dilemmas and conflicts are evident in Fires in the Mirror? In Night?
- Explain the following: “An eye for an eye leaves everyone blind.” Do you agree or disagree? Use Fires in the Mirror or Night or your experiences.
- Is it justified to respond to violence with violence? Explain using Fires in the Mirror/Night or your own experiences.
- Why do you think Anna Deavere Smith acts out the characters, as opposed to just filming them? What effect does this have on the audience and the influence of the play?

For the final essay, I provided students with Wright’s full quotation: “All literature is a protest. You can’t name a single literary work that isn’t protest,” and I gave them specific guidelines for what the essay should include. I also provided students with models of essay writing so they could get a sense of what was expected from this assignment. For example, I gave students a minilesson on what an introductory paragraph could include: “Opening hook, Introduce and interpret Wright’s quotation, State whether you agree or disagree, Introduce two texts and explain how they support your opinions, Introduce the rhetorical devices or literary elements you will use to prove/disprove Wright’s statement, Discuss how writing can be a catalyst for inspiring change.” I then provided students with a sample opening paragraph, using texts we had already read so they were familiar with the content:

Books have the power to move people. Richard Wright said, “All literature is a protest. You can’t name a single literary work that isn’t protest.” In this statement, Wright reveals that books are about struggle and how we can overcome those through our words and our language. This viewpoint is accurate and can be proven with several texts, including The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison and The Perks of Being a Wallflower by Stephen Chbosky. Using the literary elements of symbolism, theme and conflict, Morrison and Chbosky demonstrate how literature can be used to protest against injustices that occur within our communities.

Using the model, students drafted and submitted their introductions so I could give them safe and thorough feedback without evaluating them. The following days we worked on body paragraphs, where I again gave students a sample:

One technique that authors use in order to effectively protest against a social issue is symbolism. For example, in The Bluest Eye, Morrison writes about the Maryjane candies to symbolize...
the racism that occurs. The candies are images of White girls and Pecola wishes to be them; she exhibits self-hatred because of the discrimination she experiences. White equals beauty; black equals ugliness. Thus, Morrison uses these images to demonstrate the effects of racism. Another example of how symbolism is used as a political device is in The Perks of Being a Wallflower, where Chbosky presents the wallflower to argue against apathy. Charlie acts as a wallflower, taking in all that is around him without participating. Chbosky displays the effects of being a wallflower, showing how Charlie becomes depressed because he is not an active participant in the world. In this way, the wallflower image is a protest against standing back and doing nothing. Both books use symbols to do what Wright insists: using literature to fight against the ills of society.

To differentiate instruction, I offered my special needs students, English language learners, and struggling writers graphic organizers and sentence starters as a way to help them in the drafting process. Once their drafts were completed, students shared their essays with each other and we later used these papers to conclude our unit plan with a Socratic seminar on writing as protest.

Adding nonfiction texts to my classroom was a critical experience in that students could hear and live vicariously through a variety of narratives with multiple voices, perspectives, and histories. Not only did students learn to appreciate and honor a diversity of genres and texts, but they also analyzed how authors use their writing as a way to move people, as a way to empower others to either not repeat history or to change the ways in which they interact with others within their communities. Most importantly, students used their writing as a way to inspire others, provide voice, and make arguments about writing and their communities. In his final essay, Derek illustrates this work:

Richard Wright said literature is a protest. Through Fires in the Mirror and Night, Smith and Wiesel protest against violence, racism, judgment, oppression, and genocide. By putting their books out in the world, they continue to protest; every time someone reads their books, they are speaking out against huge problems in the world. It is important that these stories are out there because it sheds light on some very damaging issues.

Sharing their stories spreads education and knowledge but also spreads protest. Nonfiction reading and writing can play a powerful role in our classrooms, as students can unpack critical issues within historical contexts. Not only do they analyze multiple truths, but they can also use these writing approaches to voice their own arguments and narratives with the goal of raising awareness in others.

Works Cited


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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Learning from past mistakes can help prevent one from repeating those mistakes. The purpose of this lesson is to educate students about the past and prepare them to become concerned and active students. Students study the experience of European Jewish citizens during the Holocaust. Through a reading of a novel set during the Holocaust period, students gain a better understanding of the social injustices and atrocities that occurred. Students then research the experience of the Cherokees during the Trail of Tears and the Japanese Americans during World War II. To compare these three events, students use an online Venn diagram tool. Students write about their reactions to these events in journals and discuss them during class. Critical thinking is encouraged to allow students to come to their own conclusions about these events. http://bit.ly/1KoWmGM


Staff Meeting Announcing Cuts

Immediately following the announcement that five teachers in the room will lose their jobs in May, the principal shows the suicide prevention video. Stammering assurances, he fiddles with his tie, presses play, steps away, and the woman in the video smiles, reminds us we can be prosecuted if we don’t tell a parent that their teen is suicidal. Talk to the teen, she says, tell them there are other options. In the reenactment, a boy gives away his driver’s license as a gift, and I think about how, since high school, I have struggled to spell license correctly. For years, I looked it up in the dictionary. Now, I look for the red line under the word, like the white line healed into the inside of my arm. Once there was no word for cutter. Now, there’s a video for that too. The woman says, smiling, Tell them they could be a teacher someday, and I want back my bangs falling blackly into my eyes as I roll them. I want to pick my fingernails, pull the black scarf bandaging my wrist, look away and puff, Teacher, there’s no way I’m ever going to be that.

—Nicole Stellon O’Donnell
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