

Counter-Storytelling through Graphic Life Writing

Using the lens of critical race theory, this study examines the schooling experiences of racialized and indigenous girls in autobiographical and biographical picturebooks.

In a 2014 op-ed for *The New York Times*, award-winning children's book author and illustrator Christopher Myers (2014) wrote that young people view books as maps. According to Myers, children "create, through the stories they're given, an atlas of their world, of their relationship with others, of their possible destinations." In this article, I focus on how auto/biographical picturebooks written and illustrated by people of color and Indigenous peoples offer students alternative landscapes within which to see themselves. As writers and illustrators tell their coming-of-age stories in text and image, they call attention to alternative landmarks, lead readers to previously undiscovered locations, and provide a new mapping of familiar experiences.

I introduce the term *graphic life writing* to refer to the construction of a life story through image and text in forms such as the picturebook or comics. The term *graphic* captures the combination of visual images and verbal text and highlights the content of these texts, which, like other "challenging" picturebooks, may include disturbing images (Evans, 2015). The specific focus of this article is on racialized and Indigenous women's girlhood experiences of school in autobiographical and biographical picturebooks. The framework of critical race theory (CRT), especially the concept of "counter-storytelling" in word and image (Delgado, Stefancic, & Liendo, 2012; Solórzano & Yosso, 2009) guides the analysis of three examples of

graphic life writing that center on the intersections of race, ethnicity, class, and gender.¹ Texts include Duncan Tonatiuh's (2014) biography of Sylvia Mendez and her family in *Separate Is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez & Her Family's Fight for Desegregation*, Ruby Bridges's (1999) memoir *Through My Eyes*, and Christy Jordan-Fenton and Margaret Pokiak-Fenton's (2013) coauthored auto/biography *When I Was Eight*. This article proposes graphic life writing as one way to incorporate diverse books into the curriculum (Alemán & Alemán, 2016; Brooks, 2008; Coffey, 2015; Yosso, 2002), and argues that CRT is an especially important frame for analyzing children's texts because its "critical and cultural critiques provide literary interpretations contextualized within multifaceted and often racialized macro systems" (Brooks, 2008, p. 37). In the texts considered here, CRT draws our attention to the racialized macro system of schooling.

Critical race theorists maintain that racism is mundane and everywhere rather than aberrant and sporadic. As David Gillborn (2015, p. 278) points out, "critical race theorists argue that the majority of racism remains hidden beneath a veneer of normality and it is only the more crude and obvious forms of racism that are seen as problematic by most people." Children's picturebooks hide beneath the "veneer of normality" and often reproduce implicit and explicit misrepresentations about Indigenous peoples and people of color that, because of their

¹For further reading, see Crenshaw, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2013; Delgado et al., 2012; Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009. LatCrit is a branch of CRT that focuses specifically on experiences of Latinas/os (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). For a rationale for the use of CRT in the language arts curriculum, see Ryan & Dixon, 2006.

repetition across time and media, seem unremarkable. In sum, “storytelling is racialized, gendered, and classed and these stories affect racialized, gendered, and classed communities” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2009, p. 138).

Graphic life writing by and/or about traditionally marginalized groups allows educators access to previously unheard stories as well as alternative images that counter the status quo; these texts revise and refute stereotypes found in children’s literature and other cultural texts. Graphic life writing, then, arises as a powerful medium for representing diverse realities, for creating a culturally specific curriculum, and for exemplifying how to fight institutionalized racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013; Delgado et al., 2012; Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009).



Graphic life writing represents one way to deepen an understanding of school as an institution with a history that continues to segregate and exclude youth because of their ethnic and/or racial backgrounds.

Counter-storytelling is a particularly helpful concept for theorizing life writing in picturebook form because counter-stories emerge in image as well as in narrative. A counter-story is defined as “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society). The counter-story is also a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2009, p. 138). The graphic auto/biographical counter-stories analyzed in this article bring our attention to the ways in which racism continues to structure schooling; through examples of how youth resist, it also demonstrates how we can challenge and dismantle this oppression.

Graphic life writing by and/or about Indigenous peoples and people of color illustrates that “we need diverse books” to confront misrepresentations and white-washed histories that are erased in everyday

texts, including children’s literature, school curriculum, film, television, and other popular media—that is, texts that repeat racialized scripts and images that center Whiteness as the norm (Dahlen, 2016; MacCann, 2013; McNair, 2008; Reese, 2008; Stewart, 2013). Critical race theorist Gloria Ladson-Billings (2009, p. 24) argues that “the voice of people of color is required for a deep understanding of the educational system.” Graphic life writing represents one way to deepen an understanding of school as an institution with a history that continues to segregate and exclude youth because of their ethnic and/or racial backgrounds. The picturebook memoirs and biography analyzed below reclaim lives, images, and stories erased by mainstream histories, and resist stereotypical representations commonly found in children’s literature and culture.

Graphic Life Writing and Counter-Storytelling

Auto/biographical picturebooks are an important mode of counter-storytelling that helps us broaden our understandings of the potential for teaching and learning with diverse books. Scholars who study life writing have noted that authors and artists use a wide range of innovative genres and forms to tell and illustrate a life story (Chaney, 2011; Chute, 2010; Gilmore, 1994; Gilmore & Marshall, 2010; Marshall & Gilmore, 2015; Poletti, 2005; Smith & Watson, 1996; Whitlock, 2006). Picturebooks are one additional visual-verbal mode through which writers and illustrators construct autobiographical and biographical narratives, especially about childhood and adolescence (Davis, 2003; Davis, 2006; Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2010; Lathey, 2003; Schrijvers, 2014). Graphic life writing shows readers, through text and image, how childhood is a complex identity that intersects with gender, sexuality, class, race, ethnicity, religion, and/or ability.

It is important to note that these reconstructions are partial and not representative of an entire ethnic or racial group and that each author and/or illustrator constructs his or her life story. For instance, Allen Say (2015) notes in his picturebook memoir, *The Inker’s Shadow*, that “we remember our past in

episodes. We store them in a bag of memories we call our mind. There, the passing of time shuffles them, making some grow larger while stunting others, and blows many away like smoke” (p. 77). Life writing requires the arrangement of memories into a storyline about the self within a larger social, historical, and political context. In effect, these auto/biographical picturebooks are highly constructed visual-verbal texts that warrant close attention for the stories and images that they counter as well as the strategies authors and illustrators use to re-map the landscape of childhood for readers.

Separate Is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez & Her Family’s Fight for Desegregation

In this award-winning picturebook biography, artist and illustrator Duncan Tonatiuh (2014) chronicles the school experiences of Sylvia Mendez, American civil rights activist of Mexican-Puerto Rican heritage.² At age eight, Sylvia played an instrumental role in *Mendez v. Westminster*, the landmark desegregation case of 1946 that took place seven years before *Brown v. Board of Education*. The Mendez’s fight to desegregate California schools fits with Tonatiuh’s larger commitments to writing and illustrating stories about social justice and history. *Separate Is Never Equal* draws on court testimony, interviews of an adult Sylvia Mendez, and Tonatiuh’s reconstruction of events.

The biography is illustrated in Tonatiuh’s signature artistic style, which is inspired by 14th-century Mixtec codices, “an amalgam of written signs and pictures.”³ *Separate Is Never Equal* can be defined as a “modern-day codex.” About the influence of Indigenous/pre-Columbian art on his illustration style, Tonatiuh says, “That is why my art is very geometric, my characters are always in profile, and their ears look a bit like the number three. My intention is to celebrate that ancient art and keep it alive” (Danielson, 2014). Tonatiuh combines

his commitments to indigenous art forms with an interest in digital collage so that his illustrations “feel not only ancient but contemporary, too—and accessible to children today” (Danielson, 2014). In addition, Lettycia Terrones (2015, p. 248) notes that Tonatiuh’s illustrations also reference the Chicano Arts Movement and its use of art as a strategy for political commentary; she writes that “art as vehicle for social justice” is a central theme in Tonatiuh’s work. His carefully constructed images gesture to the past using contemporary form and media. This convergence between past and present is mirrored in the narrative as Tonatiuh crafts a life story that pulls from history and speaks to and educates a contemporary audience.

The cover of *Separate Is Never Equal* shows six children. Three White children stand with their backs to Sylvia and her two brothers. Each group heads to a different building: a clean white brick school or a grey shack. Sylvia leads her two brothers toward the less desirable building; she holds four books in her hand, signaling the relationship between education, literacy, and empowerment.

The biography begins with an event after desegregation. Sylvia is walking the halls of her integrated school toward class when a young White boy shouts at her, “Go back to the Mexican school! You don’t belong here!” (p. 2) Sylvia is pictured in the foreground, head bowed, books still in hand, with a single tear falling from her eye. When she returns home from school that day, she tells her mother that she doesn’t want to go back to school because the kids are mean. Her mother tells her “¿No sabes que por eso luchamos?” “Don’t you know that is why we fight?” (p. 3).

The narrative then flashes back to three years earlier to the summer of 1944 when Sylvia and her brothers, Jerome and Gonzalo Jr., move from Santa Ana to Westminster. Sylvia’s father, Gonzalo Mendez, leases a farm. At the end of that summer, Aunt Soledad takes her two children as well as Sylvia and her brothers to enroll in the nearest public school, which is described as “spacious and clean” (p. 7).

The secretary gives enrollment forms to Sylvia’s lighter-skinned cousins, Alice and Virginia, but refuses to give papers to Sylvia and her brothers.

²*Separate Is Never Equal* won a Pura Belpré honor award for illustration, a Tomás Rivera Book Award for young readers, and a Robert F. Sibert honor award.

³For more information, see <http://www.ancientscripts.com/mixtec.html>

The blonde, blue-eyed secretary tells Aunt Soledad that Sylvia and her brothers “[m]ust go to the Mexican school” (p. 8). Sylvia, a US citizen who speaks “perfect English,” questions this rationale. Tonatiuh accompanies the text with an image that illustrates Sylvia’s education in racism and the knowledge that her skin color determines her access to school. On a two-page spread, Sylvia faces her two lighter-skinned cousins, one with her hands curled in what look like fists. However, Sylvia doesn’t look at them; rather, she gazes down at herself, hands stretched out at her sides, trying to see what it is that marks her as different (see Fig. 1). Tonatiuh’s image captures “the moment of Sylvia’s complex racial awareness, or double-consciousness” (Terrones, 2015, p. 248). Aunt Soledad “stormed” (p. 11) out of the office and refused to enroll any of the children.

When Sylvia and her brothers begin their school year at the Mexican school, Tonatiuh emphasizes the differences between the physical spaces of the

two schools. Tall trees line the street in front of the White school. “There was a playground with monkey bars and a red swing. When they walked into the school, they noticed that the hallways were spacious and clean” (p. 7). In stark contrast, the Mexican school is a “clapboard shack, and the halls were not spacious or clean. A cow pasture surrounded the school. The students had to eat their lunch outside and flies would land on their food. There was an electric wire that surrounded the pasture to keep the cows in. If you touched it, you received a shock! The school did not have a playground—not even a swing” (p. 15). The image of Sylvia in the schoolyard takes up two pages. On the left side, Sylvia’s brothers sit facing each other and behind them one sees a cow and its dung. On the right page, Sylvia and another girl sit in the foreground against a brown background, with the shack behind them; flies surround the girls as they sit on the dirt to eat their sandwiches.

Figure 1. From *Separate Is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez & Her Family’s Fight for Desegregation* (© 2014 Duncan Tonatiuh, published by Abrams). Reproduced by permission.

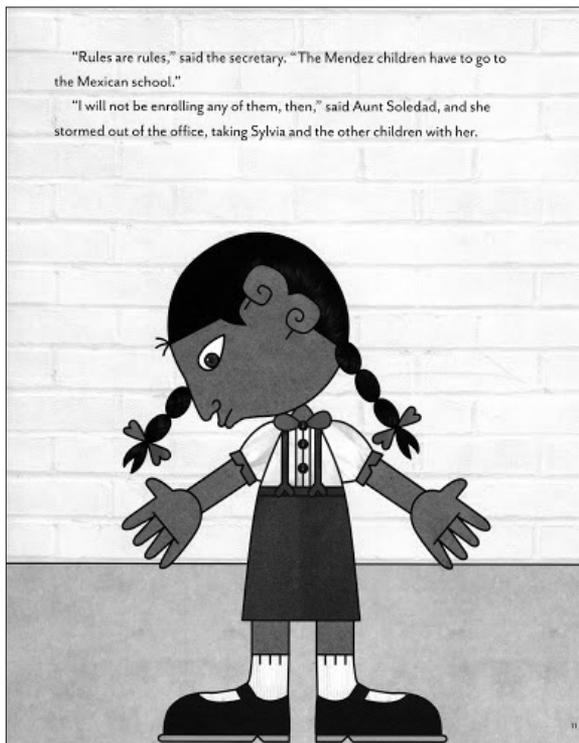
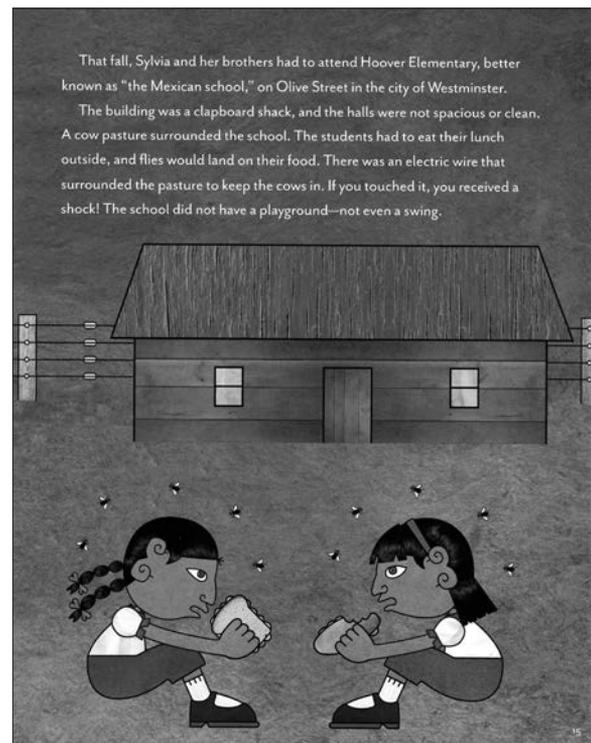


Figure 2. From *Separate Is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez & Her Family’s Fight for Desegregation* (© 2014 Duncan Tonatiuh, published by Abrams). Reproduced by permission.



Like the title of the book that includes reference to Sylvia's family, Tonatiuh refuses to make Sylvia the singular hero (Kohl, 1991); rather, this is a story of a family and a community agitating for change, and of the power of organizing across ethnic and racial groups (Tonatiuh, 2014). Tonatiuh ends the book on a cautionary note and, in the afterword, argues that school segregation is on the rise. He writes that:

According to a 2012 study by the Civil Rights Project at the University of California, Los Angeles, across the United States segregation has increased significantly in recent years. It reported that 43 percent of Latino students and 38 percent of black students attend schools where fewer than 10 percent of their classmates are white. The study, which analyzes data from the Department of Education, also reveals that Latino and black children are twice as likely to be in school where the majority of students are poor. Therefore, their schools are likely to have fewer resources and less experienced teachers. (Tonatiuh, 2014, p. 36)

This picturebook biography of Sylvia Mendez ties the past to the present through the thread of resistance to racial discrimination in image and text.

Through My Eyes

Fourteen years after *Mendez v. Westminster*, Ruby Bridges was one of four Black girls to integrate White elementary schools in Louisiana. On November 14, 1960, US Marshals escorted six-year-old Ruby Bridges into Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans through vicious, jeering crowds of White children and adults who opposed integration. Schools had been officially desegregated six years earlier in 1954 when the US Supreme Court ordered the end of "separate but equal" education in the Linda Brown case.⁴ However, the state of Louisiana had ignored the law—as had many public schools in the south. As Bridges (1999) writes in the preface, "By 1957, less than two percent of southern schools had been integrated" (p. 4). Louisiana schools were

ordered via federal court to integrate schools by September 1960.

Through My Eyes is a graphic memoir of Bridges's first-grade year. Bridges makes it clear that this is her construction of the events of 1960. She writes:

I don't remember everything about that school year, but there are events and feelings I will never forget. In writing this book, I recall how integration looked to me then, when I was six and limited to my own small world. However, as an adult, I wanted to fill in some of the blanks about what was a serious racial crisis in the American South. I have tried to give you the bigger picture—through my eyes. (Bridges, 1999, p. 5)

Writing a memoir allows Bridges an opportunity to return to her girlhood, to articulate her experiences as an adult in ways that she could not as a young child. Specifically, Bridges focuses on the intersections of race and gender through the use of first-person narrative, popular media coverage, and historical photographs to reclaim her own story in relationship to the public record and the use of her image in the fight for integration (Capshaw, 2014).

The visual record of Ruby Bridges entering and exiting Frantz Elementary has been seared into collective memory by photographs as well as by artist Norman Rockwell's "The Problem We All Live With," a painting based on vignettes from John Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley* that appeared in *Look* magazine on January 14, 1964. *Through My Eyes* allows Bridges to return to her girlhood experiences and to contextualize them. For instance, she was unaware that Norman Rockwell had drawn an image of her until she was in her late teens. Bridges's child therapist Robert Coles brought her story back into the public eye in his 1995 picturebook *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, and Disney later made a television mini-series *Ruby Bridges: An American Hero* (Palcy, 1998).

One of the features of memoir is the inclusion of documents and images that augment the narrative. Bridges includes photographs, newspaper articles, artwork, and interviews with her teacher, Mrs. Henry, and others who knew her as a little girl. These additional textual and visual artifacts provide a personal, sociopolitical, and historical backdrop. For instance, Bridges includes

⁴See Teaching Tolerance's timeline of *Brown v. Board of Education*: <http://www.tolerance.org/magazine/number-25-spring-2004/feature/brown-v-board-timeline-school-integration-us>.

black-and-white photographs that illustrate and contextualize African American history in the United States. She incorporates an image of sharecroppers picking cotton that she accompanies with a quote from her mother, Lucille Bridges: “On the day before Ruby was born, I carried 90 pounds of cotton on my back. I wanted a better life for Ruby” (Bridges, 1999, p. 7). Bridges includes images of civil rights demonstrations and the Little Rock Nine being escorted into school by Federal Marshals in Arkansas in order to put the integration of William Frantz Elementary into a historical moment for readers and place her story within the larger US civil rights movement. She also includes news coverage of her experiences from newspapers like *The New York Times* and popular magazines such as *Good Housekeeping* alongside her own childhood drawings from her work with psychologist Robert Coles.

This collecting, collating, and organizing a cohesive life story out of personal memory, documents, and cultural history is one of the hallmarks of memoir. And, like more formal picturebooks, two parallel storylines exist through the placement of Bridges’s “narrative voice alongside the iconic images” (Capshaw, 2014, p. 249). In a section called “Going Home,” Bridges writes about leaving school the first day. She remembers seeing a group of teenage boys singing about segregation. She writes that “the boys carried signs and said awful things, but most of all I remember seeing a black doll in a coffin, which frightened me more than anything else” (Bridges, 1999, p. 20). On the opposite page, Bridges places a full-page photograph of the White protestors and the Black girl-doll in the coffin. A White girl in a plaid skirt and white cardigan stands at the front of the crowd holding a cross and grinning at the camera; a confederate flag flies over the image of segregationist John W. Davis. Katharine Capshaw (2014) writes, “The scene announces both a real threat to Ruby’s life and the anticipatory joy of White masses, including White children in destroying the Black child” (p. 252). Bridges’s recollections and the documentary visual record challenge the myth of White childhood as state of

“racial innocence” (Bernstein, 2011, p. 4) and illustrate how fights over integration were played out on the schoolgirl’s body. Specifically, efforts to keep segregation in place used the mythic image of the innocent White girl-child, while fights for desegregation relied on images, actions, and the material bodies of young Black girls.

Bridges reclaims her story as she interprets it through her own eyes and vantage point as an adult. Like *Separate Is Never Equal*, Bridges’s memoir in picturebook form is a social history of the fight for integration. Bridges also concludes with a critique of schooling as a racially structured institution. In the afterword, she reminds readers that while official law might require integration, informal segregation is still alive and well. About her visits to schools in the present day, she writes: “The kids are being segregated all over again. There aren’t enough good resources available to them—and why is that?” (Bridges, 1999, p. 58). Bridges highlights how US schools remain segregated and unequally funded (Ladson-Billings, 2009), and she suggests that the fight for integration that framed the images and narratives of her own childhood continue in the present moment.

When I Was Eight

Activist and scholar Debbie Reese consistently reminds us on her *American Indians in Children’s Literature* blog that the legacy of settler-colonialism persists and that harmful stereotypical images of Indigenous peoples in children’s literature remain ubiquitous. These stereotypes fall into familiar patterns, “depictions of savage or vanishing Indians, of Indians relegated to the mythic past, of Hollywood-influenced ‘natives,’ and of monolithic, generic Indians” (Stewart, 2013, p. 218).

When I Was Eight confronts these familiar stereotypes through a memoir of residential schooling written by a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law team.⁵ It chronicles the story of Olemaun, an

⁵See also the award-winning graphic novel version for middle grade readers of Pokiak-Fenton’s experience in *Fatty Legs* (Jordan-Fenton & Pokiak-Fenton, 2010).

eight-year-old Inuit girl, and her experiences in a Canadian residential school that she attended for two years. The title page includes a black-and-white photograph of the actual school that Olemaun (Margaret) attended. Against her father's wishes, Olemaun attends the outsiders' school so that she can learn to read. She is especially intent on reading *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, a book her older sister read to her and a text that she brings with her to the residential school. When she arrives at the mission school, her Inuit name is taken away and replaced with Margaret, and her hair is cut by a "black-cloaked nun."⁶ Pokiak-Fenton recalls: "I felt naked as my braids fell to the floor." Food is sparse and consists of meals like cabbage soup. "The Raven" is the name given to the nun who takes delight in terrorizing and humiliating Olemaun in numerous ways, including making her wear red stockings that cause other girls in the school to laugh at her.

At one point, the nun demands that Olemaun scrub pots in the kitchen. The text reads:

With my arms in scalding water up to my elbows I couldn't hold back my frustration. "I could be reading," I muttered.

"What?" the nun demanded, her shoes creaking as she crossed the kitchen. She pinned me against the sink. Slowly, a smile spread across her thin lips. "Fetch me a cabbage from the basement," she ordered. (Jordan-Fenton & Pokiak-Fenton, 2013)

Illustrator Gabrielle Grimard frames the scene visually through a medium shot of the confrontation. The two figures stand in profile against an empty white background that invites readers to linger on the scene and to focus "attention on the action of the figures rather than on their relationship to their setting" (Nodelman, 1988, p. 131). The nun towers over the eight-year-old Olemaun, and the top of The Raven's head bleeds off the top of the page, visually capturing her tall and imposing stature. A cross hangs around her neck, her eyebrows are furrowed, and her cheeks are red with

rage. Olemaun compares the nun to the evil and capricious queen in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, who hands down punishments and orders for beheadings with abandon. The image of the vicious educator flips the script, and it is the teacher who is represented as "savage."

Olemaun's resistance is a key theme in the book; in the image, she looks up defiant and courageous. Reese et al. (2011) point out that youth regularly opposed the everyday violence and humiliations of boarding and residential school life, and that "[a]side from running away, this resistance took many forms; physical, spiritual, and intellectual" (p. 118). Olemaun's decision to stand up to the nun results in her being sent to the cellar. Once she descends the stairs, The Raven turns off the lights and locks Olemaun inside the dark space. The text reads:

I pulled the handle. It was locked. A scream built in my chest, but I held it in. I closed my eyes, pulled up my stockings, and breathed deeply, until I could feel my father's presence. He wrapped his arms around me in the darkness and I spelled out my Inuit name to him, whispering, O-L-E-M-A-U-N. His proud smile made me stronger, so I worked through the name of my distant home B-A-N-K-S I-S-L-A-N-D. (Jordan-Fenton & Pokiak-Fenton, 2013)

A black background spreads across two pages to capture the overwhelmingly dark basement setting. Olemaun's father appears in the image as a ghostly presence that lovingly embraces her. Her given name, Olemaun, and her home are spelled out and encircle her as she overcomes her fear. The image of daughter and ghostly father serves as a reminder of the many who died and suffered in residential schools, and the ways in which the living who attended residential schools had integral parts of their identity, including language, killed off.

Later in the book, Olemaun burns the hated red stockings in a fire that heats a vat for doing laundry. Pokiak-Fenton remembers, "I burned them to ashes. I felt like Alice after a bite of magic cake—as large as the entire room." The nun is angered at the disappearance of the socks, but Olemaun is given another pair that matches those of her classmates. "In my new thick, gray stocking I felt victorious" (Jordan-Fenton & Pokiak-Fenton, 2013).

⁶Given that *When I Was Eight* is not paginated, the remaining citations do not include the demarcation "n.p."

Figure 3. From *When I Was Eight* (© 2013 Christy Jordan-Fenton and Margaret Pokiak-Fenton[text], and © 2013 Gabrielle Grimard [illustrations], published by Annick Press Ltd.) All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.



In a final act of rebellion, Olemaun learns to read in English in spite of the nun's efforts to derail her education. The last page reads, "I was Olemaun, conqueror of evil, reader of books. I was a girl who traveled to a strange and faraway land to stand against a tyrant, like Alice. And like Alice, I was brave, clever, and as unyielding as the strong stone that sharpens an ulu" (Jordan-Fenton & Pokiak-Fenton, 2013). The image shows a close up of Olemaun's face as she makes eye contact with the reader, her head and body parts bleed off the top of the page and onto the opposing page to capture her growth, confidence, strength, and victory over The Raven.

When I Was Eight is an especially important account because it counters harmful fictionalized representations of boarding school life, such as Ann Rinaldi's (1999) *My Heart Is on the Ground: The Diary of Nannie Little Rose, A Sioux Girl*. Debbie Reese et al. (2011) provide a salient critique of this faux-diary as a damaging misrepresentation of the experiences of Indigenous children and a "white fantasy" (p. 118). Boarding and residential schools were and are a central element of settler-colonialism.

Activist and scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2013) writes that colonial policy "recognized that the destruction of Indigenous women and children was the fastest way to remove Indigenous Peoples from the land. It is the fastest way to destroy nations. So policies were designed to target children. Settler colonial policies are still designed to target children." Indigenous children were experimented upon, tortured, and regularly starved. *When I Was Eight* begins the work of reclaiming and telling that traumatic and violent history.

Margaret Pokiak-Fenton references the lingering emotional, spiritual, and physical effects of residential schooling in her opening dedication to "the Indian Residential School survivors who haven't yet found their voices." The legacy of residential schools continues to impact Indigenous families and communities, and, as Simpson (2013) points out, "The legacy of residential schools and the dehumanization of Indigenous peoples reaches directly into the families of the present. . . . There are more Native children in the child welfare system than were in the residential school system at its height because of the cycles of violence and trauma they inflicted on our families" (para. 7). Like Tona-tiuh (2014) and Bridges (1999), Jordan-Fenton and Pokiak-Fenton (2013) produce a piece of intergenerational graphic life writing that brings context to the present and teaches how current conditions are manifestations of ongoing struggles over literature, language, literacy, and power.

These three picturebook auto/biographies are examples of counter-storytelling that chart out different histories and imaginaries, and that provide an alternative atlas of childhood. Race and ethnicity are foregrounded, and familiar historical narratives and visual images are challenged by life stories embedded within particular communities. Adult authors and artists return to their own childhoods to understand, politicize, and reconstruct schooling experiences that were hard to make sense of at the time. In addition, these three auto/biographical picturebooks about school open up critical conversations about discrimination, inequity, and education. The following section of the article considers the

diverse routes that graphic life writing opens up for students and teachers in classrooms.

The Why and How of Graphic Life Writing in the Classroom

In what follows, I highlight three things that auto/biographical counter-stories allow educators to do in their language arts curricula. Each is a rationale and/or a suggestion that draws on CRT's overarching commitments to the "transformation of education" through counter-storytelling, specifically a) recognize and refute stereotypes in popular cultural and media, b) share personal, family, community, and historic stories that counter these misrepresentations, and c) pose guiding questions that may lead to engagement in activism and resistance.

Refute Stereotypes of Childhood

These auto/biographical picturebooks challenge misrepresentations of Mexican, African American, and Indigenous youth within larger visual and verbal histories, including children's literature. Numerous resources exist for critically examining stereotypes in children's texts and media, including work by the Rethinking Schools collective (rethinkingschools.org), *Teaching Tolerance* magazine, and blogs like Debbie Reese's *American Indians in Children's Literature*, a powerful resource that reminds readers how mainstream culture reproduces stereotypes about Indigenous peoples and includes lists of recommended books for use in the classroom. Readers might also refer to Derman-Sparks's (2016) "Guide for Selecting Anti-Bias Children's Books" for a list of questions to ask about storylines and images in children's literature.

It is important to note, too, that the authors and illustrators included in this article make White privilege and racism visible. For instance, Mendez's biography opens with a young White boy who tells her to go back to the Mexican school; Bridges remembers a White boy telling her he couldn't play with her because she was Black; photos included in *Through My Eyes* show White school girls at the front of the crowd that harasses Bridges, grinning at her torment. As Ebony Elizabeth Thomas notes,

"The reality is that while kids are already grappling with some of the world's ugliness . . . adults are still clinging to a Victorian ideal of an innocent child" (as quoted by Peralta, 2016, para. 17). Graphic life writing written and illustrated by and within Indigenous communities and by people of color denaturalizes the idea of the White child as an innocent bystander and calls attention to how racial subordination operates in the school.



Visual-verbal auto/biographies by and for communities historically marginalized by school open up new instructional space for students to create their own graphic life writing projects that then serve as classroom reading material.

Write, Illustrate, and Teach Counter-Stories

Visual-verbal auto/biographies by and for communities historically marginalized by school open up new instructional space for students to create their own graphic life writing projects that then serve as classroom reading material. For instance, Marshall and Toohey's (2010) study of multimodal life writing built on the "funds of knowledge" of communities and families of Punjabi Sikh students in a Canadian elementary school. Using MP3 players, students first recorded and then translated their grandparents' stories of life in India into picturebooks to serve as cultural resources in their school community. The project produced alternative histories and a bilingual and "culturally conscious" set of texts that demanded the school curriculum adapt to the storylines and images brought to the school rather than requiring children to find a way into stories that stereotype, exclude, or misrepresent them.

In other words, rather than rely on commercial publishers, educators might publish auto/biographical projects that emerge from within communities and that draw on "rich sources of material in individual and family oral and pictorial histories, institutional and community studies, and artistic and

cultural artifacts and ideologies that would challenge the racial stereotypes found in the popular and professional media” (Solórzano, 1997, p. 15). To this end, classroom teachers might begin with Scribjab.com, a combined website and iPad application that allows children to publish online books in multiple languages, including Arabic, Punjabi, Japanese, Chinese, German, Korean, and Vietnamese. Student examples include graphic life writing as well as fictional stories and include an audio button that narrates most of the stories in two languages.⁷

In addition, students can also find information and inspiration from historical accounts. Mendez, Bridges, and Pokiak-Fenton were all (by choice or circumstance) child activists. From the US civil rights movement to the contemporary Idle No More Movement (Friedel, 2015), youth are and have been leaders and activists involved in struggles for justice. It is important to note that these three auto/biographies of racialized and Indigenous girlhood and schooling underscore how deficits reside within the institution of schooling, not within students. For example, in *Separate Is Never Equal*, Tonatiuh emphasizes the stark differences between the White and the Mexican school. Graphic life writing in picturebook form offers a gateway to other stories of activist youth, such as 16-year-old Barbara Rose Johns who, on April 23, 1951, led 450 students in a strike for equal education at R. R. Moton High School in Virginia. Her story is captured in the biography *The Girl from the Tar Paper School: Barbara Rose Johns and the Advent of the Civil Rights Movement* (Kanefield, 2014).

Teachers in upper elementary might consider showing part of the film *Stolen Education* (Luna, 2013), a documentary about eight school-aged Mexican American children who testified in a federal court case in 1956 to end the discriminatory practice

that kept Mexican American children in the first grade over a mandatory three-year period regardless of their academic ability (Alemán & Alemán, 2016). In addition, the Coretta Scott King Award list has a long history of promoting counter-stories in the form of life writing and is an excellent source for locating auto/biographies to share in the classroom (Marshall, 2008). Although each of the examples of graphic life writing analyzed here represents specific personal experiences of intersecting oppressions and different social histories, each author shares a curriculum with readers about confronting and resisting systemic racial discrimination.

When reading these counter-stories and counter-images, teachers might start with students’ definitions of activism. Beginning with a basic question—“What is an activist?”—students can work individually, in pairs, or in small groups to create an image for “activist” that is accompanied by labels or a one-sentence definition. These student-created texts then become the jumping off point for the teacher to assess emergent and developing definitions as well as to gain insight into how children think about what it means to be an activist and who they believe can act (e.g., do students include everyday people or children in their definitions? Do they define their activist as a singular hero or as a member of a larger community?). Teachers might also ask a question like, “What are some examples of activism in our school, our community, and/or the larger world?” Additional books to deepen this discussion include *Kids on Strike* (Bartoletti, 2003) and *Now Is Your Time* (Myers, 2009).

Pose Guiding Questions for Graphic Life Writing

The last suggestion is that teachers develop a familiarity with Tara Yosso’s (2005, pp. 77–81) six forms of capital (see Fig. 4) as a way to think about and facilitate students’ engagement with counter-stories in the classroom (Coffey, 2015).⁸

⁷For older students, see Jerica Coffey’s (2016) article “Storytelling as Resistance” in which she critiques stereotypes with her students and then uses a counter-storytelling approach (Yosso, 2005; Yosso, 2006) for a final project in which students “research, document, and analyze the untold histories of people in their community.” While the lesson was done with older students, it could be adapted to an elementary setting.

⁸The idea to adapt Yosso’s framework into guiding questions comes from Jerica Coffey’s (2015) article “Storytelling as Resistance,” which is aimed at a high school audience.

Figure 4. Yosso's "Six forms of capital that cultivate cultural wealth" (© Tara Yosso, 2005)

Six Forms of Capital that Cultivate Cultural Wealth
(Yosso, 2005, pp. 77–80)

1. **Aspirational:** "the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers" (p. 77)
2. **Linguistic:** "the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style. . . . the ability to communicate via visual art, music or poetry" (pp. 78–79)
3. **Familial:** "those cultural knowledges nurtured among familia (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition" (p. 79)
4. **Social:** "networks of people and community resources" (p. 79)
5. **Navigational:** "skills of maneuvering through social institutions . . . not created with Communities of Color in mind" (p. 80)
6. **Resistant:** "those knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality" (p. 80)

Below is a list of guiding questions adapted from Yosso's (2005) framework. In all critical examinations of graphic life writing, it is essential to pay attention to how author and/or illustrator communicate through text *and* image.

- How does the subject of this auto/biography maintain hopes and dreams in the face of barriers?
- How do the illustrator and/or author communicate their story in images and words? (For example, Tonatiuh draws on a larger tradition of using art for social justice.)
- Does the author include or write in more than one language or dialect? Are certain literary forms used in the book, such as parables or poems? Consider, for instance, a picturebook biography, such as Don Tate's (2015) *Poet: The Remarkable Story of George Moses Horton*, or memoirs in verse for older readers, like Jacqueline Woodson's (2014) *Brown Girl Dreaming*, Margarita Engle's (2016) *Enchanted Air: Two Cultures, Two Wings: A Memoir*, or Thanhha Lai's (2011) *Inside Out & Back Again*.

- What knowledge or lessons do young people in these auto/biographies use that come from their families and/or communities? Bridges shares her own family history within the context of the racialized experiences of African Americans in the United States.
- What documents, photos, or information do the author and/or illustrator include in their life writing? Why? Ruby Bridges uses drawings from childhood as well as photographs of herself and other children fighting to desegregate schools that appeared in newspapers at the time. Walter Dean Myers's (1995) *One More River to Cross* could serve as an additional resource for thinking about one's family history as part of a larger social history or movement.
- Upon what networks of people in the community do the author and/or illustrator rely?
- How do youth navigate through institutions like the school that are not set up for communities of color and/or Indigenous peoples?
- In what ways (e.g., challenging adults, participating in protests, testifying in court) do youth resist unfair treatment or discrimination?

Conclusion

Teachers, librarians, and other adults decide whether or not to buy, share, and/or teach graphic life writing created by Indigenous peoples and/or people of color. Debbie Reese (2008) argues that "publishing houses, review journals, booksellers and libraries are all involved in the creation and consumption of children's literature. To change what happens during the processes of publication, review, and purchase of children's literature requires commitments to action on the part of parents, educators, and their allies" (p. 62). Purchasing and teaching graphic life writing by Indigenous peoples and people of color in the language arts curriculum is one place to begin confronting the equity gap in children's literature.

While graphic memoirs and biographies that focus on topics like the US civil rights movement or residential schools are one place to start

incorporating diverse books into the curriculum, there is also a need for a variety of storylines. As Christopher Myers (2014) notes, there currently exists an “apartheid of literature—in which characters of color are limited to the townships of occasional historical books that concern themselves with the legacies of civil rights and slavery but are never given a pass card to traverse the lands of adventure, curiosity, imagination or personal growth.” Thus, educators have a responsibility to also chart other kinds of landscapes for youth through the inclusion of diverse books from a range of genres, such as science fiction and fantasy.⁹

In *Separate Is Never Equal, Through My Eyes*, and *When I Was Eight*, childhood is unsparingly racialized, politicized, and historicized through the experience of schooling. Each auto/biographical picturebook visually and verbally represents racial and ethnic discrimination as individual and structural; each emphasizes how the legacies of racism and colonialism continue to shape contemporary forms of educational inequity in North America (Reece & O’Connell, 2016). Through graphic life writing, Duncan Tonatiuh (2014), Ruby Bridges (1999), Christy Jordan-Fenton and Margaret Pokiak-Fenton (2013) counter histories of misrepresentation and share culturally specific stories. Finally, these three auto/biographical picturebooks use new keys and map alternative routes through the terrain of schooling; in so doing, they draw our attention to histories of racial discrimination and to stories of hope and resistance within the North American educational system.

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INTO THE CLASSROOM WITH READWRITETHINK

The Graphic Map online tool assists teachers and students in reading and writing activities by charting the high and low points related to a particular item or group of items, such as events during a day or chapters in a book.

<http://bit.ly/2c5aCZ6>

In this autobiographical prewriting activity, students brainstorm important memories, choose graphics to represent these memories, and then rank the events as low or high points in their lives.

<http://bit.ly/2ce0ZvR>

Students interview other students, choose significant life events, rate them, graph them, and write about one or more in this activity that integrates mathematical graphing with writing.

<http://bit.ly/2bV6X5G>

Students express themselves verbally, visually, and musically by creating multimodal autobiographies, exchanging ideas with other students, and sharing important events in their lives through presentations using technology.

<http://bit.ly/1HaEaN5>

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