

DEEPENING HUMAN CONNECTION AND UNDERSTANDING THROUGH DIVERSE
VISUAL NARRATIVES IN THE ELA CLASSROOM

by

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ABSTRACT

For too long graphic narratives and film have been marginalized and excluded from English language arts (ELA) classrooms. Along with these modalities, the over use of the literary canon in classrooms has prevented voices of diverse races and cultures from being represented or heard in the stories teachers share with their students. This paper dives into all three of these topics: graphic narrative usage, film usage, and most importantly, diversifying the texts included in ELA curriculum. After presenting findings on each of these topics, an inclusive thematic framework has been included as a suggestion, a guide to teachers who wish to move away from the canon and towards a classroom that recognizes people across races, across cultures, and across modalities. This thematic framework includes text set suggestions, film suggestions, a grading guide for choice projects, and lists of questions that will help guide both students and teachers in their journeys to recognizing the human behind all stories.

INTRODUCTION

“Here’s to prying open the gutters, to dwelling, learning, and creating within them and also to freeing what does not wish to remain there.” –David E. Low et al. 2020

I grew up in a small rural town and graduated in a class of thirty students. On a weekly basis, my peers and I wrote five paragraph essays, read canonical texts, then wrote more five paragraph essays. As a reader, I didn’t see anything wrong with reading the books I read; these were the "classics" after all. I watched books burn alongside Montag, saw children fight for survival on an island, and watched Gatsby pine over Daisy. Only after high school did I realize that watching Scout and Atticus define racism for me made racism itself feel like a moment of the past. The racism in this country felt obscured, just like the pieces of Sherman Alexie’s *Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* my teacher skipped over when she read it to us out loud. My school system showed me a world that didn’t recognize racism or acknowledge the voices of diverse races and cultures: a world I should have been aware of, but did not discover until after graduating from high school. I encountered this world during the first #BLM movement. I began to pick up and read books that were written by non-white authors: *Stamped* by Jason Reynolds and Ibraam X Kendi, *Ghost Boys* by Jewell Parker Rhodes, *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds, *The Round House* by Louise Erdrich, etc. The importance of diversity in ELA classrooms rose with each voice I uncovered. Why hadn’t I heard these voices before? Why did my school choose a curriculum that wasn’t current or representative of the world we live in?

Though my graduate research was originally rooted in visual narratives, as a whole, the project felt like there was a missing piece.¹ After reading *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games* by Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, I knew racial diversity in texts had to become a prominent part of my research paper because it needs to become a prominent, vital, part of ELA curriculum across the nation. All classrooms need to have settings that honor the lives and the stories of all people across races and across modalities (Thomas, 2019; Germán, 2021). As research should, this paper has taken many twists and turns over the last two years. Following my curiosity has led me down a path I did not foresee. Honestly, I was almost certain I would write something on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, but my wonderment drew me into a dimension unknown to me, one full of color, passion, emotion, artistry, and muffled voices: the world of graphic narratives.

Graphic narratives are a type of visual narrative. They are texts that use images, sometimes words, in a print (or e-book) based format to tell a story. After committing to the study of graphic narratives, I decided to study film as well: to research these visual narrative modalities side by side. I discovered that studying any modality should be studied as they are. Trying to fit any modality into the same mold as another does not work and it is largely an insult to the creators of those stories. I promote both film and graphic narratives in this research paper because they have been under promoted in the past. The voices in these mediums have been stereotyped and swept under a rug. Graphic narratives were almost excluded altogether, and film was treated as a reward for students and a break for teachers. Collectively, the moves to exclude

¹ Visual narratives are stories that are told through the word to image continuum. They may or may not use words, however, images are always present in the telling of the story (see more in the section entitled "Defining Visual Narratives")

graphics and film created a stigma that they are unworthy of educational use, which is not the case.²

Many people have heard the phrases: *comic books are for kids*, *film doesn't belong in classrooms*, and *visuals don't need interpretation*. Frank Serafini (2014), Scott McCloud (1994), Will Eisner (2008), Gretchen Shwarz (2006), and other visual narrative scholars have attempted to debunk these myths. Even school librarians and teachers have switched to calling comic books “graphic novels” to rid the title of “comic” and make the modality seemingly more serious.³

While graphic narratives are usually only seen in classrooms for younger students, many graphic narratives relay stories that are not directed towards children, though they are often viewed as texts for children (Horrocks, 2001; McCloud, 1993). The misconception that this modality is solely for younger students is stuck due to a lack of knowledge about the graphic narrative modality and the power of images. I have winced and cried more times interacting with graphic narratives in the last year than I ever have in a standard year of reading typographic novels. There is something about images that can be utterly sharp and heartbreaking when eyes gaze upon them. There is an emotional tax that comes with viewing the mice screeching in Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (see Figure 1).⁴ There are surges of anger beneath the cherry blossoms in Keum Suk Gendry-Kim’s

Figure 1

Mice that Represent Jews in Auschwitz



Art Spiegelman, 1980

² There are a few graphic narratives that have held their places in the ELA classrooms over the last number of years: *Maus* by Art Spiegelman and *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi

³ “Comic” as the root of “comical”

⁴ So much emotional tax that a school board in Tennessee banned the graphic narrative from the school, causing the book to be sold out across the country. Meanwhile, the pages are black and white, there is no red blood, no excessive language, or human beings drawn (for that matter), yet the book has been banned for “disturbing images” (Heuvel, 2022).

Grass, and an array of childlike joy that travels inside the pages of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*. In an interview with *The Washington Post*, Art Spiegelman shares that "One of the reasons 'Maus' [has become] so threatening [is because] it's in comics form," that the artwork—the images—is what makes the story vivid and memorable (Cavna, 2022). As Lev Grossman (2003) advocates:

Some of the most interesting, daring, most heartbreaking art being created right now, of both the verbal and visual varieties, is being published in graphic novels. These books take on memory, alienation, film noir, child abuse, life in post-revolutionary Iran and, of course, love. (p. 1)

When the layers of graphic narratives are peeled apart, and viewed as the multimodal ensembles they are meant to be, the reader can make connections to meanings that lie beneath the panels (Low, et al., 2020). The stories told through pictures and words give us an opportunity to delve deeper into the lives of others in a way that both feels and sees alongside them.

Film also holds a powerful position. Between YouTube, the movies, commercials, and TikTok, film holds perhaps the largest storytelling modality and is the farthest reaching. It is direly important that our students have the skills to critically examine everything they watch so they can be aware of underlying messages and aware of how film (and the images portrayed in film) directly impacts their lives and their beliefs. Students also need to recognize (as producers of their own films) the messages they are sending, and how they can use film to be activists. These skills can be promoted through teaching critical media literacy and listening skills in the ELA classroom, skills that also ask audiences to take note of the racial justice discrepancies in mass media (Thomas, 2019, Morrell, 2020).

After diving into visual mediums, I have discovered that visual narratives possess a unique perspective on racial justice. In this paper I will explain the impact images can have, why they are academic, how visual narratives are tied to social justice, as well as how we can include

diverse visual narratives in our classrooms in a way that supports racial justice through the use of thematic units. This paper will also include example questions to use when diving into visual narratives, visual narrative suggestions for the classrooms, and an explanation for the importance of critical media literacy skills. All of these aspects aimed at helping teachers understand what it means to listen across modalities and the importance of human connection and empathy in our classrooms.

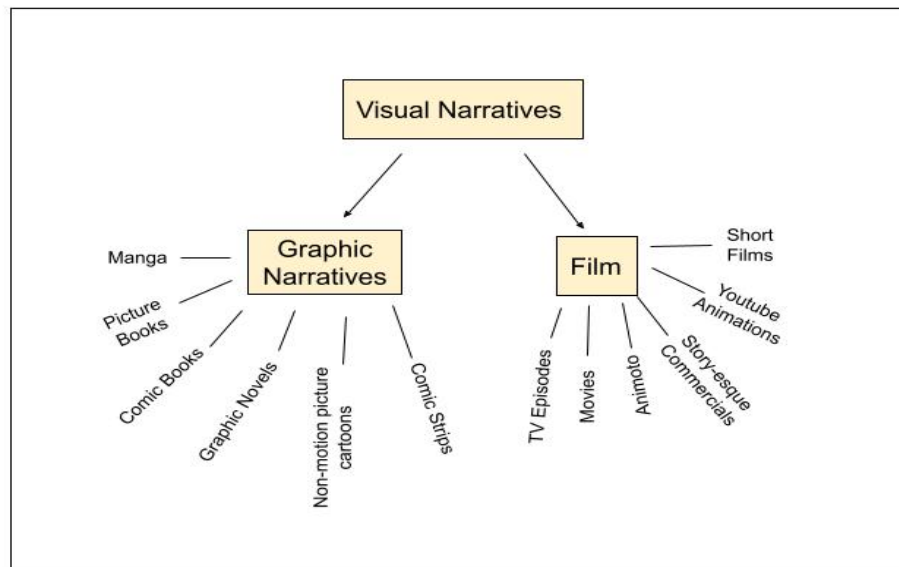
VISUAL NARRATIVES

Defining “Visual Narratives”

After reading scholars in the visual narrative field, I have assembled definitions and a diagram (see Figure 2) for terminology that will be used throughout this research paper. The umbrella term I will be using to encapsulate both film and graphic narrative modalities is “visual narratives.” “Visual narratives” are stories that are told within the word to image continuum. They may or may not use words, however, images are always present in the telling of the story. Neil Cohn (2019) uses the phrase “visual narrative” as an umbrella term for stories that are often drawn (i.e., picture books or comics). Similarly, Frank Serafini (2014) occasionally uses “visual narrative” in place of “graphic novel.” I am stretching this term further to include “film” because film consists of sequential images (visuals) that convey a continuous sequence to tell a story (narrative).

Figure 2

The Visual Narrative Umbrella Structure



Tasheena Erickson, 2022

Some may note that “visual narrative” and “graphic narrative” show a synonymous similarity, so why choose “visual narrative” as the umbrella? Looking closer at the meanings of each word, Oxford Languages (2021) presents the following definitions:

Visual: 1. relating to seeing or sight. 2. a picture, piece of film, or display used to illustrate or accompany something.

Graphic: 1. relating to visual art, especially involving drawing, engraving, or lettering.

Bringing these definitions into consideration, the word “visual” applies to “graphic narrative” and “film” modalities because they all can be seen. The pairing with “narrative” suggests that “visual narrative” is a *story* that can be seen. “Graphic,” on the other hand, is defined as a “visual art” that can be seen and has a further requirement for the narrative to be animated in some way. This is why I will be using “graphic narratives” as the umbrella term for the sub modes shown in Figure 2. Will Eisner (2008) classifies “graphic narratives” as any narrative that employs image(s) to convey a story or an idea, which includes both “film” and “comics.” The separation I am evoking here is that “graphic narrative” is limited to printed or book-like texts with still images, whereas “film” is its own category under the “visual narrative” term in Figure 2.⁵ For the sake of this paper, “film” encapsulates any *motion* picture that tells a story. “Film” includes both animated and non-animated motion pictures.

⁵ Scott McCloud similarly coined the term “comics” as an umbrella word for the sub modes of “manga,” “graphic novels,” “comic books,” and “cartoons.” He felt like the word encapsulated the entire medium and did not point to a specific object (as in “comic book” or “manga”) but as the storytelling art form itself. Given McCloud’s point of view, “comics” may also have been used in place of the “graphic narrative” term I will be using throughout this paper (1993).

Listening to Visuals: A Foundation

The notion that images do not need interpretation is a myth (Serafini, 2014; Eisner, 2008). Yet, it is one of the reasons visual narratives have not universally found their way into ELA classrooms. There are many different layers to interpreting the images we see and the stories behind those images; it is through interpreting those images that people can recognize the person(s) behind the story and the messages being portrayed. Just because people can watch and mimic images does not mean they are well versed in interpreting them (Eisner, 2008). Visual comprehension is not universally transparent—it takes time and practice to learn how to interpret the visual, and all visual interpretations are going to vary (much like interpretation of literature) (Cohn, 2019). Often what viewers see in the visual is only half the story (Hall, 1993). There are always varying perspectives from what the author and artist wish to be seen, and how the reader and audience choose to interpret what they see (Eisner, 2008). There is often great contrast between the characters' point of views and what is seen (or not seen) in the story—this takes a great deal of skill on the reader's part to interpret.

Adding visual narratives into the ELA curriculum will not take away from traditional writing practices or literacies, but expand student learning into multiple literacy fields (Shwarz, 2006). Critically thinking about images is a skill that can be used across modalities and social spheres. Many people do not recognize images as forms of communication that affect many aspects of their lives: affect their identities, their moods, how images influence the labels they're given, and their belief systems (Serafini, 2014; McCloud, 1993). When a person doesn't attempt to analyze visual narratives, visual narratives can be quite overwhelming, and the deeper meaning(s) embedded in the work may be lost.

Helping students become more aware of how images affect them is a matter of teaching them to slow down, to infer, to take notice of the messages being sent through images beyond immediate interpretations (Serafini, 2014). Similar to teaching students to “read between the lines” in a typographic novel, students must also be taught to “see beneath the images” in visuals. When interacting with a visual narrative, students must focus on more than just the words being portrayed. For example, reading a graphic narrative uniquely combines words and images that must work together to convey meaning (Eisner, 2008; McCloud, 1993). Teaching students to analyze visual narratives can include teaching them to read body language, be aware of what *isn't* being shown, what *isn't* being said, and what the chosen artwork (or filming) style means. Regardless of modality, visual interpretation falls to teaching students how to “listen.” Listen has a different meaning in this context. To listen is not only hearing sounds, but being in tune with surroundings, with worldly vibrations, having the ability to feel for clues that lead to understanding the artwork, the stories, or the everyday interactions people face (Lipari, 2014). Manas Moulic and Mohibut Raham (2019) define “listening” as:

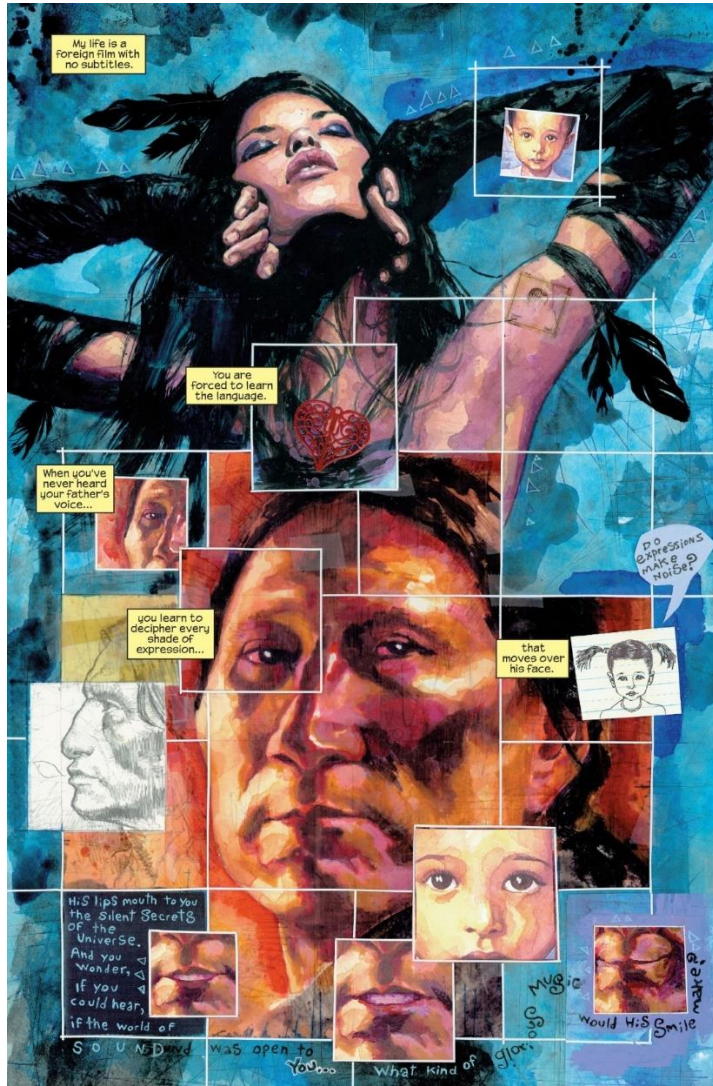
Not limited to the reception of words and sentences but include all auditory and visual signals, noise as well as words; unintentional as well as intentional sounds, the tone and intonation of the speech, the deliberate pauses used, and the silence; the eye and facial expressions; the body languages and appearance of the speaker. And once this aural as well as visual stimulus is received with attention, efforts are taken to perceive the information and intention of the speaker through various skills, schemata and comprehension processing. (p. 4853)

When teachers teach students to slow down, to view, and to interpret varying aspects of a visual narrative, students are also learning how to listen towards recognizing and understanding portrayed messages and stories of others.

Lisbeth Lipari (2014) writes about how fully listening, how learning to communicate, is of the utmost importance because communication is how “we do human being” (p. 113). Not all communication comes through verbal or written mediums. Body language and facial expressions

Figure 3

Echo and Communication



David Mack, 2015

listening from multiple angles that people can become better humans, and through listening that they are able to connect and understand other human beings (Lipari, 2014). The inclusion of

also play a huge part in understanding what is being communicated. David Mack's story of Echo, a deaf Native American girl, is an excellent visual example of how communication must exceed the bounds of verbal and written communication (See Figure 3). Echo learns to witness every little body movement and facial expression. She learns to communicate through Indian Sign Language and expresses herself through her artwork. When people view stories that use artistic modalities, as Echo's story does, they are taking a step towards understanding different points of views, different cultures, values, and the struggles people face. It is through

visual narratives shows readers that the “human” persists through storytelling across all genres, including genres where image is a large portion of human experience (Barbre, 2019).

Learning to analyze images at a slower, more intuitive pace, readers can identify messages that are not written or seen in plain sight. For example, in viewing Figure 4 from Figure 4

Superman Meets his Parents



Gene Luen Yang & Gurihiru, 2020

biologic family. However, using deep listening skills to slow down and infer further in this

image, most readers should be able to notice the following because of the way Superman looks

human: Superman’s parents may not actually look like aliens, that may just be the way Superman

sees them. Superman could be viewing his parents as “aliens” because they are not human, so he

sees them as Americans have defined the term to him: green and unworlly with antennas.

Analyzing this aspect of the story, readers can notice underlying meanings of distrust, and the

fear of being labeled an alien. In viewing Figure 4 it is possible to infer that Superman does not

want to be unworlly; that he does not want to acknowledge his heritage because he wants to be

human, so that’s how he sees himself. Reading further into the story, readers may be able to

notice that Superman also chooses not to fly because he is afraid of being alienated by humans.

Superman Smashes the

Klan, by Gene Luen Yang,

there are a few things that

are obvious at first glance:

the aliens are Superman’s

parents, and Superman not

recognizing his parents

hints at a strong disconnect

between Superman and his

This fear isn't written in dialogue boxes, but can be inferred by looking at the images. When Superman overcomes these fears, when he accepts that "alien" doesn't have to mean "scary" or "different," or "green with antennas," he realizes that he deserves to use his full superhero capabilities, does he see his parents in human form. Further thinking about the terminology of "alien" can pull readers into considering how some Americans label people as "illegal aliens" and the detriment to that terminology. Figure 4 can also be a pathway into discussing self-esteem. In this figure, Superman looks brave, but in reality, readers eventually learn he is afraid to use all his superpowers—to be who he is completely—due to fear of social acceptance.

When teachers apply deep listening skills to our students' reading and discussion exercises, they help foster students who are able to connect with one another and work toward understanding each other's perspectives. This skill is broadened when teachers choose to apply it to visual narrative fields. When they pull in visual narratives, students learn how to read and listen with additional stimuli—additional stimuli they will have when interacting with people and with media outside the classroom. Learning to notice the little messages and empathetically responding to those messages is important for building an inclusive classroom. These messages do not always show themselves through written or verbal narratives, which is why teaching this listening skill is so important, and why this paper is emphasizing reading and creating visual narratives in classrooms. Elizabeth Dutro (2019) writes:

To witness is to be present, to listen, to see; [...] Testimony to difficult experiences may be explicitly spoken or written, or may lurk implicitly in a comment during a turn and talk or in a picture drawn on the page of a writing journal [...] and because the body is always testifying to our experiences, stories of trauma are found in a quivering of lip or hand, eyes not quite focusing on a page, limbs moving oh-so-slowly across a room or squirming all the way out of chairs. (p. 6)

When teachers expand their curricular reach of stories in the ELA classroom, students are more likely to be heard and more likely to hear. Being aware of how to listen *fully* to conversations and body movements, being able to analyze images, and infer deeply into the media they are watching and creating is a part of helping students learn what it is to be human.⁶

Figure 5

Longing for Home



Keum Suk Gendry-Kim, 2019

Visual Narratives and Racially Diverse Texts in ELA Classrooms and the World

Historically, the suppression of the arts has been used to oppress groups of people (Torres, 2020; Germán, 2021). The English language and Eurocentric culture have long been at the forefront of English classrooms (Torres, 2020; Germán, 2021). These two pillars have pushed people of diverse cultures and races into the shadows, including people who hold languages aside from English (Torres, 2020). Disrupt Texts cofounder, Julia Torres (2020), reminds us that “Often the worship of the written word has been used historically to oppress non-white people [...] Specifically [...] Native people being told that they needed to forget their own languages” (12:33–12:44).⁷ Many Native American tribes used images and body language to communicate,

⁶ For figures not directly referenced in the text consider what the image means to you. Ponder how it makes you feel and how the image stands alone without context. What story is the image telling?

⁷ Disrupt Texts is an organization founded by Tricia Ebarvia, Lorena Germán, Dr. Kim Parker, and Julia Torres. This foundation of teachers was created for teachers and supports the disruption

from painting stories on walls, weaving symbols into baskets, to using Indian Sign Language

Figure 6

Betty Ross Remembers Her Own Language



David A. Robertson, Scott B. Henderson, & Donovan Yaciuk, 2021

(refer back to Figure 3) to communicate across tribes

even when they didn't speak the same verbal languages

(Mack, 2015). These communicative expressions are

suppressed in classrooms where only canonical

literature is read and the classroom only focuses on

text-only writing assignments (i.e., redundant five

paragraph essays). Lorena Escoto Germán (2021),

another Disrupt Texts founder, sees these practices as

"White supremacy culture [that is] alive and well" in

classrooms (p. 38). Germán envisions that "There

should be traditional narratives, graphic novels,

books in prose, and others. Disrupting the traditional

canon, the one arbitrarily designed and authored by a society that deemed others worthy of

colonization and genocide, is necessary" (p. 35).

Teachers have the power to expose their students to real world circumstances and share stories that travel across time, space, cultures, *and* across modalities (Morrell, 2020). The themes

and voices in the stories are what bring people closer together as human beings. Ernest Morrell

expresses that one way to explore a vast world is through different modalities such as poems,

articles, and novels, but also artwork, and media, including visual narratives. He believes that

teachers need to dive into different modalities to better represent the world to their students.

While moving away from the canon has often meant incorporating young adult literature,

of the literary canon in hopes of creating ELA classrooms that are more diverse, inclusive, and representative of the world.

incorporating multiple modalities can also help break the traditionally oppressive literary system. By promoting visual narratives in the classroom, teachers are not diminishing the value of the written word, but highlighting visual narratives as another relevant source that should be considered, but often are not, because of oppressive canonical foundations (Shwarz, 2006). Bringing visual narratives into classrooms as primary sources for students opens up a bridge to forms of communication that are often overlooked due to them being historically watered down or deemed as un-academic.

While acknowledging the damage that has occurred through the “worship” of the written word is not going to erase historical damage, making certain changes in the classrooms can help prevent such suppression in the future (Thomsen, 2018). First, diversifying everything students are assigned to read and watch in the classrooms with diverse races and cultures will open up a world of representation that is direly needed (Germán, 2021; Thomas, 2019; Bishop, 1990). Secondly, incorporating the arts in the classroom and acknowledging the different communicative forms that art can take, through visual narratives, should help both students and teachers to learn to appreciate a broad array of communication styles and understand that the written word is not the only expression available. The ability to communicate across modalities and share diverse stories is a step towards overcoming a “wall of ignorance” (McCloud, 1993, p.198).

Racially Diverse Texts in ELA Curriculum

The lack of character diversity in stories is not confined to the literary canon, but reaches across all story mediums: films, magazines, novels, graphic narratives, and more (Thomas, 2019). To some there is a stigma that "a story is just a story, no matter the characters involved."

A friend of mine said this to me as I explained the importance of diverse texts. However, all stories have implications, especially when presented as required reading in a classroom. Lorena Escoto Germán (2021) wrote “To exclude [BIPOC] from curriculum is to murder us” (p.12).⁸ Since books are windows into the imagination and portray the world to our students, diversity in text sets is paramount to showing students how diverse the world is and that all people are included in that worldly diversity (Bishop, 1990). The texts teachers choose are direct representations to their students about *who* matters in this world (Morrell, 2020). When teachers and administrators consistently rely on the literary canon, they are focusing on texts that have been historically prioritized: white authors and white main characters. Due to the persistence of canonical literature, children of color have mainly read books that are windows into the lives of people different from themselves, and white children have only been offered fiction that mirrors their own lives, yet, all children need both (Thomas, 2019, p. 167). One of the Disrupt Texts pillars is about being careful to not compartmentalize what readers read. Disrupt Texts warns against compartmentalizing how readers apply what they read to their lives because all people are human. The canons contents portray an illusion of what is important and who is important. Disrupt Texts disrupts this in asking readers, teachers, students to realize that humans are more similar to each other than the canon leads people to believe. Diversity in the texts teachers offer students is paramount to building a community of people who are inclusive of each other. This inclusivity does not exist in the canon.

The importance does not rest on having visual narratives in the classroom, but on having racially and culturally diverse visual narratives in classrooms to actively promote racial justice

⁸ BIPOC stands for: Black, Indigenous, people of color

and intercultural understanding in a medium that has been long overlooked (Morrell, 2020).

David E. Low et. al. (2020) state that:

The arts are uniquely situated to explore the tensions and borders for further and missing stories, especially for those whose cultures, histories, languages, and experiences that have been erased by traditionally oppressive institutions, policies, curriculums, and knowledge structures. (p. 106)

This is a perspective also shared by Lori Ayotte (2017), Loreta Escoto Germán (2021) and Julia Torres (2020), all who see visual narratives as uniquely situated to expand teaching practices,

Figure 7

Diverse Students in a Classroom



Tasha Spillett, & Natasha Donovan, 2018

and as windows into a broad array of cultures. Using racially diverse visual narratives is a unique step towards overcoming the oppressive literary canon because both diversity and visual narratives have been massively excluded from that canon. These

teacher scholars mention modality, variety, graphic narratives, and arts in passing, yet, visual narratives are uniquely situated to promote social justice conversations.

As Howard Rosenberg (1979) proclaims:

The problem is now, as it has been for more time than I care to remember, how to arouse within each student a pride in, and respect for, the individual and each other. Students urgently need to feel their own worth and, as important, to feel the worth of others—all others—in a world which grows smaller, more compact, and more complex each day. (p. 10)

Rosenberg stated this over forty years ago and it still rings true today. Perhaps through teaching diverse visual narratives in an insightful way that centers listening, students can take another step

towards respecting and empathizing with the perspectives of others. Learning to read emotional cues and care about another's story is imperative in helping students expand their empathy and their diverse world views. Using visual narratives presents an excellent opportunity to help students break barriers that they haven't yet. In reading visuals, students can become skilled at visual analysis, at seeing the humans behind the story—behind the images, to feel alongside them, and to witness their struggles. When this topic is approached in the classroom and students are taught to view for understanding, they may also learn to empathize and honor stories that have been muffled for far too long.

Visual Narratives that Promote Racial and Social Justice:

What happens when readers imagine racially diverse characters in prose novels versus when they can visually see those characters through the work of an artist, inked on pages? What happens when people hear about and imagine a tragedy vs when those same people watch the live footage of that tragedy on the television? Words are incredibly powerful. They bring people to tears, move them to anger and to joy. Words make audiences fall in love, make them laugh, and encourage them. Yet, if a picture is worth a thousand words, where can one picture take a viewer mentally, emotionally? In traditional prose novels, the reader has complete control over the scenery and the characters in their imagination, only guided by the author's descriptions. A character meant to be a tall blonde may become a short brunette per the reader's desires. But how can a reader change the weather from rainy to sunny when they can visually see the rain drops pounding the cement, the dark looming sky, and a drenched raincoat? In prose, readers teleport themselves. In visual narratives, readers are teleported.

With visuals, readers see what the artists and authors want them to see: The images are as bold, as dark, as light, as the author wished them to be. They control the physical space and transform the scenery to radiate mood and feeling in a way that adjectives in a prose novel attempt to do (Donovan & Ustundag, 2017, pg. 223). In Figure 8, an image from *Home* by Julio

Anta et. Al., the reader can visually see the swiftness of a child being taken away from his mother through the horizontal lines. In the next panel, readers can feel the weight of emotion forcing the mom to the ground through the vertical lines, and of course the rage of anger and sadness in the next two panels as the mother realizes her helplessness and the direness of her situation. This scene is a mother and child being separated at the American border. As the son escapes custody, the mother is deported back to Guatemala. *Home* uses images to show the serious emotional repercussion when families are separated due to deportation. While words could attempt to describe these panels, only in visual form does the

Figure 8

Mother and Child are Separated



Julio Anta, Anna Wieszczyk, Bryan Valenza, & Hassan Otsmane-Elhaou, 2021

artist and author control the flood of tears, the exact skin tone, the facial expressions, the speed at which the child is taken, and the weight pressing the mother to the ground. As the reader is forced to bind these panels together by envisioning the story in motion, readers create what Pam Watts (2015) describes as “closure.” When the reader stitches the frames together in their mind, they are choosing to believe what is happening on the page by bringing it to life in their minds,

therefore creating an emotional connection with the characters and the situation. Watts (2015) states that “Closure can generate reader empathy for the characters in the story. This makes graphic novels especially valuable to social justice educators who want to provide their students with windows into multiple identities and experiences” (p. 39).

Visual narratives are unique in promoting racial justice because readers are forced to see the characters and the circumstances as they are, whereas in prose novels, colors and features of characters can be easily altered by the reader (Watts, 2015). A good example of this is Rue in *The Hunger Games* by Susan Collins. In the book, Rue is described as dark-skinned, yet when Amandla Stenberg was cast as the actress for the film, many people were outraged because they didn’t envision Rue as Black, causing social media uproar (Thomas, 2019). It is evident that when some people read *The Hunger Games*, they did not see Rue as she was meant to be seen, but nobody could deny who she was once she moved to the big screen. This shows that with typographic texts, readers have the control to teleport themselves into a world guided by the text, but that they also have the power to alter details like skin color. Whereas in the film, viewers were teleported to a visually constructed world where Rue’s character was unalterably Black. The same uproar—shaming the casting of Black actresses—was also seen with the casting of Kat Graham to play Bonnie in *The Vampire Diaries*, and the casting of Angel Coulby to play Guinevere in BBC’s *Merlin* (Thomas, 2019). These uproars are occurring partially because people grew up reading and watching stories play out with white main characters almost exclusively. These uproars are another reason why racially diverse narratives are essential in ELA classrooms. By including visual narratives specifically that feature non-white characters, like in *Home*, students can start seeing a world that is widely diverse—a world where colored characters are unquestionably main characters, as they are in real life.

The power of images makes visual narratives uniquely positioned to promote social justice issues. When working towards social justice, one of the most important actions teachers can take is through exposure. Hashtags, logos, and images have become societies go-to for social justice promotion via media.⁹ By reading the stories and struggles of people who have faced

Figure 9

Creating Art to Promote Remembrance



Tasha Spillett, & Natasha Donovan, 2018

injustices, traumas, love, etc., readers become witnesses (Dutro, 2019). Readers become witnesses by pulling the experiences of others close enough to connect to their emotions, their fragility, and their strength, to connect with the experiences they've had as fellow human beings (Dutro, 2019, p. 31). Connection is vitally important in recognizing the human in everyone. People must critically examine themselves and the stories of others and realize how lives are “interpreted” and “impacted” differently by “systematic and sustained oppression” (Dutro, 2019, p. 31). For teachers, and their students, to fight for social justice, they must first

recognize the injustices that people of different cultures, languages, races, and circumstances face. When people are not aware of the struggles other people face, they are not able to take actions to help those people.

The graphic narrative form assists readers in the endeavor towards racial justice because “The combination of rich graphic imagery, engaging content, and effective pedagogy facilitate greater understanding and empathy through the integration of both linguistic and visual texts”

⁹ In Figure 9, the activists cut out hearts and butterflies for their signs before an awareness protest on lost Indigenous women. Also Consider: #Blacklivesmatter, #metoo, human fist logo, Indigenous women wearing a red hand print across their lips, etc.

(Barbre, 2019, p. 140). While the written words give readers a context, the images in graphic narratives force them to confront the situations (the injustices *and* the victories) on the pages (Watts, 2015). The images radiate emotions through colors and abstractness that are often too hard to describe when only using words (Donovan & Ustundag, 2017). The combination of words and images in graphic narratives give artists creative space to fully express their stories and their emotions to the best of their ability (Donovan & Ustundag, 2017). This type of capability within the graphic narrative modality is why the publishing world is seeing so many graphic narratives being published about social injustices—about trauma, tragedy, abuse, racism, war, etc. (Watts, 2015). Uniquely, the graphic narrative field is seeing a broader array of diverse topics being published, trending towards stories with more racially diverse main characters than

Figure 10

The Ghost of Indigenous Women Protect the Living



Tasha Spillett, & Natasha Donovan, 2018

typographic novels (Watts, 2015). For example,

Tasha Spillett and Natasha Donovan used this

medium to produce the *Surviving the City* series. In volume one, they highlight the tragedies of missing Indigenous women, both historically and presently.

The light blue ghosts that follow the main characters

(Dez and Miikwan) are Indigenous women who

have been lost, murdered, or those who were

historically taken from their homes and forced into

residential schools (see Figure 10). The dark

creatures that lurk behind other characters and in

crowds are symbolic of danger. These dark creatures become prominent, especially as the reader reaches a series of statistics, including the alarming statistic that “Indigenous women are almost

three times more likely to be killed by a stranger than non-Indigenous women” (p. 52). The visual drawings of these creatures make them noticeably dark, empty, and dangerous. The readers can sense the fear in the characters by looking at their facial expressions and body languages as they pass these strangers with dark auras. Simultaneously, the light blue ancestors are drawn as good, and are seemingly guides and protectors to the main characters (view Figure 10 and Figure 11).

When Dez goes missing, Miikwan, Dez’s best friend, joins activist groups in efforts to make people more aware

of Indigenous women being overlooked (see Figure 11). The authors use this medium for exposure—to make the audience aware of what it feels like to be in a crowd of strangers as an Indigenous woman, to

have the weight of all the

Figure 11

Creating Awareness about the Lost Indigenous Women



Tasha Spillett, & Natasha Donovan, 2018

lost women follow them every day, and how using their voices during tragedy can draw a crowd, provide awareness, and most importantly, cultivate hope through activism.

In a world that has long experienced white-centered canonical literature, pulling in diverse visual narratives provides opportunity to boost the exposure of injustices and help dismantle the oppressive canon. This is a step towards fostering a culture that is inclusive and

understanding of each other's differences, one that reduces prejudices both inside and outside of the classroom (Watts, 2015). When teachers choose to incorporate books that cultivate awareness, like *Surviving the City*, and *Home*, students will begin to understand the importance of listening closely, the importance of being active in creating awareness, and the importance in noticing ways they can help their fellow human beings foster change for the better.

CLASSROOM APPLICATION: CHOICE, THEMATIC UNITS, AND TEXT DIVERSITY

Figure 12

Moving Forward Together



Rainbow Rowell & Faith Erin Hicks, 2019

The next half of the paper is designed as a framework for teachers to dive deeper into what it means to bring visual narratives into the classroom and ways to do that. The following sections create a framework that supports student choice, graphic narratives, films, and student expression, using scholarship as a foundation. The following pages provide example visual narratives and lists of suggested questions for student discussions in order to dive deeper into the importance of analyzing film and teaching media literacy in the classroom.

Thematic Unit: Diversifying Student Choice

Teacher scholars such as Sarah Herz (2005), Penny Kittle (2013), and Donalyn Miller (2009) advocate for student-choice and self-selection to be used inside the classroom, realizing that there is sincere importance in giving students opportunities to explore their own interests. When only one text is assigned to an entire class, there will be many students who won't connect with the material or who will struggle simply because they are not interested in the selected work

(Kittle, 2013; Herz, 2005; Miller, 2009). Teacher should focus on granting choice to students in the novels they read. When students have choice, they may find themselves interested and will often find themselves engaged and excited to embark on the reading journey (Roberts, 2018). When students have this level of control, it empowers them and can promote a positive outlook on reading as a whole (Kittle, 2013; Miller, D, 2009).

Ernest Morrell (2020) believes that one step towards cultural inclusivity includes student choice: “A culturally responsive curriculum honors student choice and student voice: We are more concerned with what students have the power to do than what we put in front of them” (p.3). When teachers make all choices for their students—what book they’re going to read, what format they’re going to respond to it with, and what the topic is going to be—students may feel confined and feel like their voices are not valued. If teachers want students to be engaged, to be able to tap into the experiences of another person with their full attention, they must have a willingness to dive into that material. While oftentimes the teacher’s excitement (or lack of) can set the pace for some students, in order for students to be engaged, every students needs their voice to be heard.

Though choice is an excellent way to boost reader motivation, the books our students have access to read is also important. Ebony Elizabeth Thomas (2019) believes that the struggle to get students to read has a lot to do with the lack of diversity in the texts teachers offer them:

Maybe it’s not that kids and teens of color and other marginalized and minoritized young people don’t like to read. Maybe the real issue is that many adults haven’t thought very much about the racialized mirrors, windows, and doors that are in the books we offer them to read, in the television and movies we invite them to view. (p. 7)

Even if teachers have diverse texts in their classrooms, how do they ensure that students are reading both books that are mirrors and windows (Bishop, 1990)? How do they make sure

students have access to stories that reflect them and that push them to think outside their own life circumstances into the lives of others? There are ways to do this. Kate Roberts (2018) had students form “book clubs,” where small groups of students would choose a book to read together from a short list of titles provided. Roberts assembled these titles based on a common thread that the books shared. Lorena Escoto Germán (2021) also has her students choose from books that share thematic similarities, so she has some control over narrative to ensure “Black, Indigenous, and people of color and other marginalized voices are represented” (p. 33).

Combining these practices, teachers can bring together a classroom that is inclusive of diverse main characters, inclusive of multiple modalities, and allows students the power to choose. Below are three large sections that will discuss how to put together the basics of a thematic unit. The first section focuses on implementing graphic narratives, the second focuses on film, and the last section focuses on student responses.

Implementing Graphic Narratives into Thematic Units

The following section focuses on graphic narratives: how to find graphic narratives in communities, suggestions on what to think about before choosing a text, a few ways to stay connected in the graphic narrative field, and a table of graphic narrative suggestions that features marginalized main characters and text set suggestions. This section also addresses the following misconceptions: *graphic narratives are hard to find*, *academic-worthy graphic narratives are hard to find*, and *there won’t be that many graphic narratives that honor diversity*.

Finding and Choosing Graphic Narratives

Diving into the graphic narrative modality I did not know what to expect. It seems to me that I was expecting lightweight content. I also expected graphic narratives to be hard to find, perhaps one or two shelves at my local libraries. Why else would graphic narratives never be included in the classroom? They had to be hard to track down, right? Wrong. Both the libraries in my area had not one, but three entire sections devoted to graphic narratives: a section for kids, one for young adults, and the largest section: graphic narratives for adults. Even the local Barnes and Noble had a lengthy wall full of graphic narratives. Finding graphic narratives wasn't difficult; they exist in abundance in libraries, book stores, and on the Kindle and comiXology apps. The error was that I had ever sought them out before.

My next misconception was: "good, academia-deserving, graphic novels must be far and few between." Wrong again. Growing up on canonical literature, I felt that there was a standard I needed to uphold when choosing graphic narratives in the classroom. While graphic narratives shouldn't be held to the same standards as typographic novels, I knew I wanted stories that could inspire, stories that were well told in the sense that they had smooth transitions, character development, and positive or informative messages. There was an incredible number of graphic narratives that made the cut because they held up and surpassed these standards. They were the stories that pull on empathy strings, on human connection, and every day human struggles. Often the stories that I decided not to include in Table 1 were stories that seemed to be missing a prominent part of storytelling. For example, I did not add *Banned Book Club* by Kim Hyun Sook because there were giant gaps in the story. The story would jump from one situation to another without any warning, no panel breaks, page breaks, etc. The rule of thumb in this decision process was: if I can't follow the storyline, how can I expect my students to? The stories we

choose matter. The characters in the stories we choose matter. How those stories are told matters. As teachers look for graphic narratives for their classrooms, they should consider what stories they are bringing in, who the main characters are, and just as importantly: how the story is being told.

My last misconception was (like with typographical novels) I was afraid I would struggle to find graphic narratives that featured main characters of color. Especially after failing to find a graphic narrative featuring a Native American main character at Barnes and Noble, I was stunned to find multiple at my local libraries. This is to say: racially diverse graphic narratives are accessible, waiting for literary minds to hold and to be witnesses to the stories of many.

To stay up to date with current graphic narratives, new releases, and trending graphic narratives, I suggest following these pages:

- “Project LIT Community” (@ProjectLITComm) on Twitter:
 - Project LIT Community works towards empowering readers and writers. Every year they put out a collage of books that they recommend for the classroom. This list is diverse in modality and is racially and culturally diverse. Some of their recommended graphic narratives for 2022 are: *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds and Danice Novgorodoff, *New Kid* by Jerry Craft, *Speak: The Graphic Novel*, *Almost American Girl* by Robin Ha, and more.
- “(GNAT) Graphic Novels and Teachers” on Facebook
 - A group for teachers to read graphic narratives together, share what they’ve read, and talk about classroom implications. There are many recommendations and opportunities for interaction on this page.

- “Disrupt Texts” @ disrupttexts.org
 - This group is a magnificent follow. This website will often share texts to implement in the classroom that are racially diverse, and occasionally a graphic narrative is recommended. More so, they tackle discussions on how to move away from the canon, and how to be more racially and culturally inclusive in our classrooms.
- Any other pages associated with graphic narratives or diversifying reading inside the classrooms.

Tips for Teachers in Implementing Graphic Narrative Based Text Sets:

Teachers may use the following tips when considering bringing graphic narratives into their classrooms. These are tips that I have found important in implementing graphic narratives.

1. Before implementing graphic narratives into the main classroom curriculum, be sure to have a foundational understanding of how graphic narratives function, and the terminology that coincides with graphic narrative modalities (i.e., bleed, panels).
2. Choose a number of graphic narratives that you have read and that meet your own story standards that you believe would be a good fit for your student group.
3. Pair texts together based on similar themes to create a mini text set. Remember that traditional novels can also be included in the text set. The goal is to implement graphic narratives, not to ban typographic novels. (Although, a unit that focuses on the graphic novel modality could be beneficial as many students may not have interacted with that modality in the past). Also consider novel lengths when pairing together text sets. While

groups may be reading different texts, it may be a good idea to keep their workloads similar.

4. Once text sets are established, consider adding in short films or additional materials that share the mini text set theme(s) to share and explore as a whole class.
5. Before having students choose which text they want to read, consider a mini lesson on how to read graphic narratives. Likely, many students haven't interacted with this modality in the past. Showing students how to read from panel to panel (top left to bottom right), and presenting them with different panel layouts to familiarize themselves with will be helpful to prevent them from becoming overwhelmed.
6. Consider comiXology or Kindle versions for students who struggle with focusing on one panel at a time and become overwhelmed. ComiXology and Kindle apps both allow the user to swipe panel to panel rather than from page to page.¹⁰
7. It may be tempting for students to read from dialogue bubble to dialogue bubble, ignoring or just glancing at the images on the page. Consider having students interpret and analyze the images. A good way to do this is in a mini lesson where the class can consider how the images and words may contrast with each other.

Questions to Consider when Reading Graphic Narratives:

Whether reading a text together or in groups, or solo, it is a good idea to have guiding questions for students to consider. These questions can be presented for the whole class during a mini-lesson, on a sheet of paper for groups to go over, or even for students to reflect on in journals as they read their chosen texts. The way these questions are presented should shift from

¹⁰ This works with *most* graphic narratives. There are some graphic narratives that do not offer this panel-to-panel option.

classroom to classroom based on the students' inference skill levels, their preferences (i.e., out loud discussions vs journals) and needs. The idea here is that overtime, students will have the ability to think critically about the answers to these questions in many (if not all) of the texts they encounter.

- a. What does the artwork tell us that the dialogue and thought bubbles do not?
- b. What artwork techniques did the artist use to portray the tone and the mood of the scene?
- c. Did the artist/author choose to tell their story through abstract drawing, allegory, or through realistic artwork?¹¹ Do you think their artwork style helps or hinders the story's message? In what ways?
- d. What messages is the author trying to get across? What moves is the author making to present those messages? What underlying messages are there that are not as obvious?
- e. How do these characters or the characters' situations relate to your life? How are they different from your life circumstances or who you are as an individual?
- f. What injustices do you see in the text?
- g. Are there any issues that remain unaddressed?
- h. Whose voices are heard in this text? Who is silenced?
- i. What did you find most shocking about this story?
- j. What questions do you have? [student directed]

¹¹ Consider how Spiegelman in *Maus* does not draw human beings in his story, but turns them into animal categories based on their race vs how Satrapi in *Persepolis* draws people to tell her story.

Graphic Narrative Suggestions

Table 1 is full of graphic narrative suggestions. Under “Title” are graphic narratives that feature minoritized main characters that I have read and would personally bring into my own classroom. I also see these texts as a potentially good fit for other ELA teachers. In “Summary and Comments” there is a short summary for the graphic narrative listed and any additional comments that I believe are necessary to consider. Under the “Possible Topics to Explore” there is a list of themes that the graphic narrative covers. Choosing a theme(s) is at the center of creating a mini-text set for students to choose a text from. When students are reading books that have similar thematic natures, it will be easier to foster conversations as a whole class and easier to create whole-class activities that are relevant to the entire class community. After choosing a theme to focus on, teachers should be able to pull together text sets based on their personal knowledge and using the books they have read in the past. Under “Suggested Text Sets and/or Additional Materials: (Across Modalities)” I have listed an example theme and provided a list of potential texts that could be the additional choice options for students (as alternatives to what is written under “title”). Under the subheading “Additional Materials” are other texts or suggestions I believe would be useful in a unit that focuses on that particular thematic text set. “Additional Materials” is a great spot to incorporate film into the ELA classroom.

Table 1. Graphic Narrative and Text Set Suggestions for the ELA Classroom

Title	Summary and Comments	Possible Topics to Explore	Suggested Text Sets and/or Additional Materials: (Across Modalities)
<i>Superman Smashes the Klan</i> by Gene Luen Yang	Follow Roberta's family as they move to America and try to fit into a community overrun by the KKK. A blend of historical with pop cultural Superman. Enticing and relevant.	Racism, identity, family dynamics, overcoming fear, addressing stereotypes, importance of cultural languages	<u>Text Set Example:</u> (Race, Identity and Superpowers) <i>Ms. Marvel</i> by Willow Wilson <i>Home</i> by Julio Anta and Anna Wieszczyk <u>Additional Materials:</u> "Superman and Me" by Gene Luen Yang (Essay)
<i>American Born Chinese</i> by Gene Luen Yang	A graphic novel that tells three separate stories before tying them together. One story is the fable of the Monkey King, another is about Jin Wang who is Chinese-American and tries his best to blend in, and the last one is the story of Chin-Kee who is the embodiment of Chinese stereotypes.	Racism, identity, addressing stereotypes, the yearning to belong	<u>Text Set Example:</u> (Stereotypes, trying to be American) <i>Ms. Marvel</i> by Willow Wilson <i>Almost American Girl</i> by Robin Ha <i>Superman Smashes the Klan</i> by Gene Luen Yang

Table 1 Continued

<i>Grass</i> by Keum Suk Gendry-Kim	Keum Suk Gendry-Kim retells the true story of Granny Lee Ok-sun, who was a kidnapped child forced into being a comfort woman during WWII. Filled with beautiful images to contrast the tragedy beneath words and black and white images. The story of Granny Lee Ok-sun is vividly tragic. I suggest this title to college level students. Teaching this novel to high schoolers would require a massive amount of support and likely parental permission. Tread wisely.	Trauma, WWII, True Story, comfort women, survival, sexual abuse, belonging, family, important of telling personal story and speaking up	<u>Text Set Example:</u> (True War Stories) <i>Persepolis</i> by Marjane Satrapi <i>Maus</i> by Art Spiegelman <u>Additional Materials:</u> Consider Materials on the Japanese/Korean side of WWII "Poilus" short film <u>Text Set Example:</u> (Abuse and Healing) <i>Speak</i> by Laurie Anderson <i>Sugar Falls</i> by David A. Robertson <i>A Thousand Splendid Suns</i> by Khaled Hosseini <i>Kite Runner</i> by Khaled Hosseini <i>The Round House</i> by Louise Erdrich <u>Additional Materials:</u> Consider materials that discuss abuse and healing
<i>Long Way Down</i> by Jason Reynolds and Danica Novgorodoff	A graphic novel version of Jason Reynolds YAL book <i>Long Way Down</i>. Follow William as he tells the story of his neighborhood, their traditions, and the decisions he must make after his brother is murdered. His journey takes place in an elevator as he is visited by ghosts from his past with a gun in his possession.	Family, tradition, tragedy, identity, breaking traditions, becoming something other than what the community tells you to be	<u>Text Set Example:</u> (Exploring YA focused Black authors) <i>Yummy</i> by Gregory Neri (GN) <i>Long Way Down</i> by Jason Reynolds (Novel) <i>Ghost Boys</i> by Jewell Parker Rhodes (Novel)

Table 1 Continued

			<u>Additional Materials:</u> Excerpts from <i>Stamped</i> by Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi Black history articles, documentaries, testimonies, etc. "I am not Your Negro" documentary
<i>Maus</i> by Art Spiegelman	Art Spiegelman tells the story of his father, and his family's experiences during WWII.	WWII, trauma, true story, family, loss, friendship, tragedy, healing, remembering the past, war	<u>Text Set Example:</u> (True stories of War) <i>Persepolis</i> by Marjane Satrapi <i>Grass</i> by Keum Suk Gendry-Kim <i>They Called Us Enemy</i> by George Takei <u>Additional Materials:</u> Consider additional history on WWII Consider newspaper reports on the banning of <i>Maus</i> in Tennessee "Persepolis" animated movie <i>Poilus</i> (Short Film)
<i>Ms. Marvel</i> by Willow Wilson	Kamala Khan is unhappy with her family's rules and struggles to be comfortable with her identity. She is then given Ms. Marvel's super powers, and tries to find a balance between Ms. Marvel, her familial identity, and who she really wants to be.	Identity, family dynamics, a story of a Pakistani-American girl trying to fit in, the desire to be someone you're not, change	<u>Text Set Example:</u> (Identity, stereotypes, culture) <i>Superman and Me</i> by Gene Luen Yang <i>American Born Chinese</i> by Gene Luen Yang
<i>Persepolis</i> by Marjane Satrapi	Marjane Satrapi retells her experiences growing up during the Iranian Revolution, being shipped off to Vienna, and finding	Iranian Revolution, True Story, family,	<u>Text Set Example:</u> (True War Stories)

Table 1 Continued

	her way back home to Iran.	tradition	<i>Maus</i> by Art Spiegelman <i>They Called Us Enemy</i> by George Takei <u>Additional Materials:</u> <i>Persepolis</i> (Film) <i>Funny in Farsi</i> by Firoozeh Dumas, chapter 5 “With a Little Help from My Friends” “Did You Hear the One About the Iranian American” TedTalk
<i>Pumpkinheads</i> by Rainbow Rowell, Faith Erin Hicks	Two best friends live one more day together at a carnival before the start of their new college lives. A very friendly story to make a person smile.	Friendship, end of a life chapter, body image, first impressions	<u>Text Set Example:</u> Consider reading texts based in rural communities, or texts that highlight new beginnings. <u>Additional Materials:</u> Can be based on body image, first impressions, friendships, self-esteem, living in a small community, or new beginnings.
<i>Boxers and Saints</i> by Gene Luen Yang	Two separate graphic narratives that tell the same story of war, each from a different perspective.	War, perspective, identity, family, heritage	<u>Text Set Example:</u> Consider having student choose either <i>Boxers</i> or <i>Saints</i> to read
<i>They Called Us Enemy</i> by George Takei	The experiences George Takei had during internment camps in WWII retold through his graphic narrative.	WWII, family, childhood, internment camps, resiliency, discrimination	<u>Text Set Example:</u> (War and Childhood) <i>Persepolis</i> by Marjane Satrapi <i>Boxers and Saints</i> by Gene Luen Yang <u>Additional Materials:</u> Consider reading news reports and watching additional testimonies on WWII internment camps

Table 1 Continued

<i>Home</i> by Julio Anta and Anna Wieszczyk	A Guatemalan mom and son are separated when trying to immigrate to the U.S. The mom is deported and the son is left alone. Finding his way to his aunt, the son discovers he has superpowers and struggles to understand why ICE is hunting him.	Immigration, identity, racial justice, family	<u>Text Set Example:</u> (Identity Seeking, Superpowers, Family) <i>Afar</i> by Leila Del Duca & Kit Seaton <i>Ms. Marvel</i> by Willow Wilson <u>Additional Materials:</u> Consider reading news reports and hearing testimonies based on ICE, deportation, and American immigration
<i>Afar</i> by Leila Del Duca and Kit Seaton	A brother and sister are left by their parents and try to survive together. The sister has astral projection capabilities that leads her into different worlds and cultures when she sleeps.	Diversity, family, survival, otherness, new beginnings	<u>Text Set Example:</u> (The Fantastical) Stories from <i>Moonshot: The Indigenous Comics Collection</i> Any other fantasy/sci-fi short novel, film, or story
<i>Almost American Girl</i> by Robin Ha	Chuna, a 14-year-old Korean girl, moves to America. In this memoir comic, Chuna tells the story of her trying to fit into American society and find her place in the world while trying to overcome the language barriers.	Family, immigration, language barriers, racism, identity, belonging	<u>Text Set Example:</u> (Diversity, new schools, identity, fitting in) <i>New Kid</i> by Jerry Craft <i>American Born Chinese</i> by Gene Luen Yang <u>Additional Materials:</u> “Let’s Eat” animated short film “New Boy” Short film
<i>Sugar Falls: A Residential School Story</i> by David A. Robertson	Daniel, as student, interviews Betsy, a Cree elder, who shares her childhood story and shares her experience attending a residential school in Canada as a young girl. <i>Sugar Falls</i> is incredibly short, but also incredibly powerful. I suggest pairing with	Healing, family, survival, history, residential schools, languages, importance of sharing personal stories, physical	<u>Text Set Example:</u> (Residential schools, separation from family) <i>Surviving the City</i> by Tasha Spillett & Natasha Donovan (Vol. 1)

Table 1 Continued

	a longer graphic novel or a typographic novel.	abuse, trauma, sexual abuse, abandonment	<u>Additional Materials:</u> Read additional testimonies, materials, or watch documentaries on residential schools
<i>Moonshot: The Indigenous Comics Collection</i> (Vol. 1)	A collection of visual short stories that feature Native American characters and Native American mythological stories.	Varies from story to story	<u>Text Sets:</u> Consider having students pick which visual short story to read
<i>Surviving the City</i> by Tasha Spillett & Natasha Donovan (Vol. 1)	Two young Indigenous girls walk through life with their ancestor's history on their shoulders. They have their ancestors following them as ghosts, they protect the girls and comfort them. There are darker creatures that lurk behind strangers and present a danger to the Indigenous girls: this goes to show the fear the teenagers have due to the historical killings, and residential schools and missing women of their race. When one of the teens goes missing, the other seeks justice and action through protesting.	Friendship, heritage, residential schools, missing Indigenous women, activism, loss, fear, history	<u>Text Sets:</u> <i>Sugar Falls: A Residential School Story</i> by David A. Robertson <u>Additional Materials:</u> Consider reading articles and watching reports on missing Indigenous women and residential schooling
<i>New Kid</i> by Jerry Craft	The story of a young Black boy starting over at a new school where diversity is low, and his struggles overcoming the culture shock.	Culture shock, new beginnings, diversity, racism, family	<u>Text Sets:</u> (Diversity, new schools, identity, fitting in) <i>Almost American Girl</i> by Robin Ha <i>American Born Chinese</i> by Gene Luen Yang <u>Additional Materials:</u> "New Boy" short film
<i>Daredevil The Man Without Fear: Vision Quest</i> series by David Mack	Follow the (fictional) story of Echo, a Native American woman who is deaf. Follow her as she uses her artwork to make sense of her childhood, being abandoned by her mother, and her father dying when she was nine. Watch how she uses artwork to share her adventures and make sense of her emotions. Entwined with Indian Sign Language and abstract art, this is a masterpiece.	Deafness, artwork, passion, family, tragedy, abandonment, search for identity through artwork	<u>Text Set Example:</u> <u>(Superheroes and identity)</u> <i>Superman Smashes the Klan</i> by Gene Luen Yang <i>Ms. Marvel</i> by Willow Wilson <u>Text Set Example:</u> <u>Indigenous People:</u>

Table 1 Continued

	Note: No longer in print, but highly available on Kindle and ComiXology		<u>histories, stories, and myth</u> <i>Moonshot: The Indigenous Comics Collection</i> <i>Surviving the City</i> by Tasha Spillett & Natasha Donovan (Vol. 1) <u>Additional Materials</u> Add in verbal stories, documentaries, and fantastical myths by and featuring Indigenous people
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Implementing Film into Thematic Units

Film does not work the same in the classroom as prose or graphic narratives. Presenting students with film titles to choose from and having every group watch their chosen film doesn't seem practical, especially when most classrooms only have one TV or overhead projector.¹² However, if we have students choose texts to read that are thematically similar and the teacher then chooses a film to present to the class with that same theme it will give students an opportunity to compare and contrast what they learned through their readings with their classmates as a whole.

A problem that movies present in the classroom is how time consuming they are to watch. A two-hour film in a 50-minute classroom will be played over the course of three days. This is why I have focused on providing short film titles instead of movie titles (though there are

¹² I am not saying this can't be done. If the school in question has a Chromebook or laptop for every student and headphones, perhaps having groups analyze their own films is a possibility. However, for the sake of this framework, film is going to be presented differently.

still a few). Using short films also has an advantage because they won't be chopped up and they will be viewed as they are meant to be: as whole stories, told second to second in motion.

Including film in a classroom unit focused on miniature text sets is a grand way to bring students together to assess and compare the thematic similarities and differences in the texts they're reading with what they are seeing on screen. Students need opportunities in classrooms to learn and to practice media literacy skills so they can pick out and analyze messages in everyday media outside of classrooms (Serafini, 2014; Eisner, 2008). When films are purposely chosen to teach students (i.e., as additional material in a thematic unit), they may begin to learn vital skills to become aware of the weight film possesses.

Including film in our curriculum presents teachers opportunities to diversify the stories their students are exposed to and the messages they are being sent. When teachers choose film with purpose (beyond a "break") they acquire a chance to show their students how impactful that modality can be. Rosenberg (1979) believed that film had an advantage over prose, that film could better portray the worth of a human being. This is due to visually seeing a person go through the emotions or the chaos in the storylines. Film is a visual narrative that moves on its own and provides images that are realistic and easy to connect with, which enhances emotional connection. Rosenberg (1979) believed that when tied to purpose, "film has a way of attacking the emotional vulnerability" (p. 13) of our students. This is especially true when teachers consider how films affect students' self-esteem, and alter how students identify themselves in the world based on film stereotyping and social orders.

Mainstream movies also rarely create narratives that cast non-white main characters—especially in fantasy and science fiction narratives (Thomas, 2019). As I searched for short films,

I found myself frustrated by the utter lack of minority characters. Ebony Elizabeth Thomas shares her frustrations with the “white-centered” media (books and movies) in *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games*. She suggests that teachers can view popular films with students in a racial justice lens that leads to awareness of racial injustices and inequalities. Ebony Elizabeth Thomas encourages people to see “The Dark Other” in all narratives (2019). Her book explores three immensely popular young adult (film and book) narratives: *The Hunger Games*, *Harry Potter*, and BBC’s *Merlin*. The importance of looking at these films through the “dark fantastic” lens is that it uncovers the voices that are ever so present through their invisibility and the silence. Thomas (2019) explains that "Although we are trained to read texts from the narrator's point of view, when we turn our literature and media upside down, and read it from a dark fantastic perspective, we find the dark girls in the shadows have much to say" (p. 54). Teachers also must be careful when watching films that have characters of color because often those characters are stereotypical across media (Thomas, 2019; Mitchell, 2005).

Thomas’ ideals are important to apply to classrooms because she presents the question: “Who is not being heard.” This question applies to all texts and all stories that are read and watched. This question is highlighted by many scholars who are trying to diversify ELA curriculum, including Lorena Escoto Germán (2021), Ernest Morrell (2020), and Julia Torres (2020). Teachers should not avoid all stories that have white characters, that is not the aim. The goal is to be inclusive of the voices that have been muffled, to read and watch stories across modalities, stories that are inclusive of voices and people across races and cultures. The film and graphic narrative suggestions presented in Table 1 and Table 2 feature characters of color as main characters not because teachers shouldn’t be reading literature with white main characters,

but because classrooms are already full of those voices and do not need additional attention in this research paper. To be inclusive, teachers can ask themselves “who isn’t being seen or heard” as they interact with all stories. This question can be a guide towards learning how to better listen to people for understanding.

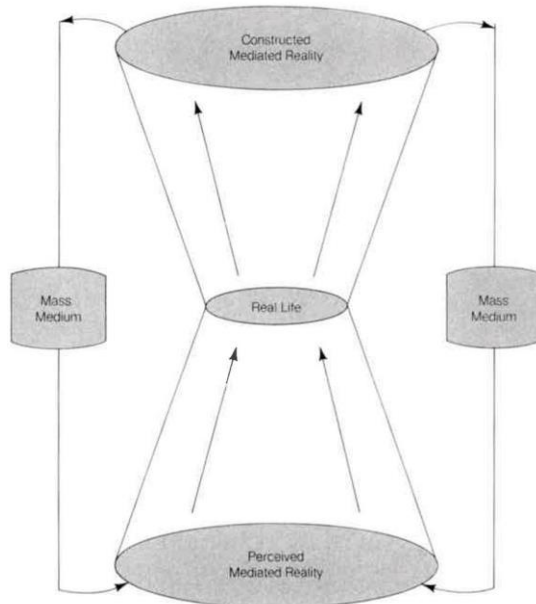
Media Literacy

When teachers add films to their thematic units, it is possible to ask the same questions listed under graphic narratives questions. Yet, since film is a different modality, there is a better way to approach film. As consumers and producers of media, students need to be aware of the messages they are sending and the messages they are receiving from everyday mediums (i.e., film). Teaching a media literacy elective, (using the work of Brian Miller to guide me at the time), I found myself mesmerized by the discussions the classroom was filled with after watching a short film, commercial, music video, or a movie. The important piece was that the discussions were not just fandom based, but received pushback from the students. There were daily impromptu debates that helped them understand different opinions and how many different views a group of people can take from witnessing the same video. With guiding questions and little direction, students were able to pick apart the films and analyze them respectfully and critically. Two sources that are useful when integrating film into the ELA classroom and teaching students how to respond to film is Brian T. Miller’s blog website (<http://millerbrian.com/stories-n-stuff/entertained-to-death>) and Edward Jay Whetmore’s “Cone Effect.”

The cone effect, originally constructed by Edward Jay Whetmore (1985), can be used as a mind opener to the ways that mass media affects daily lives (Refer to Figure 13). Here is how the

Figure 13

The Cone Effect



Edward Jay Whetmore, 1985

cone effect works: Someone in “real life” decides to make a

movie, write a novel, publish a TikTok, etc. They

construct a story or a message, format it, and send it

into the world. The mass media distributes that

content. A reader or a viewer sees or reads that

content and perceives that to be the way the real

world is—the way the world works, and those

messages follow and affect that person as they

continue in their everyday endeavors.¹³ That person

may also choose to create a new

reality/story/message based on what they’ve learned

and send it into the world, starting the process over again.

This cone effect is the eggshell to explaining why media can cause depression, low self-esteem, how media can create prejudice views, stereotypical beliefs and foster biases.

Introducing students to the cone effect will give them a larger picture to consider when watching films during the thematic units and a larger picture for them to consider during their own media-oriented lives. I have created an adaptation of the cone effect diagram that can be passed out to students with enough room in the boxes and margins for them to be able to take notes and list examples of how media directly affects them (located in Appendix A). Teaching students how to

¹³ I.e., A person reading traditional fairy tales may conclude that all princesses are white (persuading them to uproar against the casting of Angel Coulby as infamous time-transcendent Princess Guinevere) (Thomas, 2019)

break down the cycle and be critically aware of how the media works and affects them will hopefully help reduce prejudices, highlight injustices, and help them create their own identities apart from what the media insists that they are or who they should be. Most of the thematic units teachers create will touch on identity and/or injustices.

Looking at the unit functionality: teachers will choose texts for students to read that have relating themes. They choose stories that are diverse, that feel real, that pull on heartstrings, and help students create a deeper understanding of what it is to be human and how to recognize the human in the people that surround them (learn to empathize). Media literacy is the portion of instruction that will help students be aware of why they feel the way they do about the media they encounter and realize the hidden messages in the media that is affecting not only themselves, but the people around them.

Questions to Consider when Watching Film and Implementing Media Literacy:

These following questions are excellent starting points for discussing and analyzing film, from short films, science fiction, documentaries, to commercials and music videos. Similar to the questions under the graphic narrative section, these can be used in various ways and the way they are implemented should change from classroom to classroom based on student preferences and needs. They can be a way to engage the class in a whole class discussion, used as journal prompts, or guiding questions for groups. Teachers can also consider having each group only answer a few of these questions about the same video, bringing the class back together to explore each group's discoveries. Each of these questions aims at pushing students to think outside the box and to infer deeper into what they are seeing versus what messages are actually being portrayed:

- “What is the meaning of it all?”
- “What characters are at the forefront?”
- “What characters are in the background, how are they significant? What do the characters in the background have to say?”
- “Are there any stereotypical characters? Perhaps a character that shares the same traits as another character in a different show or shows?”
- “What role does dialogue play?”
- “What can we infer based on body language?”
- “What is the narrator not telling us?”
- “Did you notice any injustices?”
- “What messages is the film trying to portray?”
- "How do you relate to the characters or the story?"
- "What moved you the most?"

Film Suggestions for Thematic Units

The following table is a short list of short films and movies I have pulled together and suggest for classroom use. These can easily be added into thematic units. Under “Title” is the title of the film and the modality (either short film or movie). Under “Summary” is a peak into what that film is about. Under “topics” is where I have listed thematic threads within the film. I have created the “topics” column in hopes that it will be easier for teachers to piece together why and how a film would fit into a thematic unit from above or a thematic unit they are creating

themselves. In the column entitled “Pairing Examples” is a list of graphic narratives or typographic narratives that would pair well with the film. All of the following films feature main characters across diverse races and cultures. Note that while these are designed for thematic units, they can be used and studied by themselves, apart from a unit study. Even taking a week to study short films and explore the realm of media literacy will be beneficial for students in the long run.

Table 2. Film Recommendations and Topics for the ELA Classroom

Title	Summary	Topics	Pairing Examples
“Sorry” Oscar Winner (Short Film)	A teacher punishes a student every day for being late to class. Later the teacher sees why the student is late for class and feels overwhelming guilt for the way they have acted.	Guilt, mistakes, unknown life circumstances, the things we cannot see, life struggles, standards, punishment	Try pairing with: <i>Boxers and Saints</i> by Gene Luen Yang (Similar theme of taking perspective)
“Give: Selfless Love and Legacy” (Short Film)	A son is ashamed of his father because his father was poor. “Being rich isn’t about how much you have but how much you give”	Hope, giving, family, love, sacrifice, richness	Try pairing with: <i>Almost American Girl</i> by Robin Ha (Similar relationship between Robin and her mom, and the son and father in the short film)

Table 2 Continued

“Forest Man” (Short Film)	A short documentary about one man in India who has planted so many trees in his lifetime that he has created a forest for animals of India to thrive.	Change through action, hope, climate change, animal life, human capability	Try pairing with: <i>The Hate U Give</i> by Angie Thomas (Thematic similarity of change through action) <i>I am Malala</i> by Malala Yousafzai (Thematic similarity: hope, change through action, human capability) <i>Surviving the City</i> by Tasha Spillett & Natasha Donovan (Thematic similarity: hope, human capability, taking action)
“I Forgot My Phone” (Short Film)	A short film that shows people with phones paralleled with people’s experiences who did not have their phones, and the disconnect that occurs when we communicate and live with a cellphone in our hands.	Communication, living, disconnect	Try pairing with: <i>Backlash</i> by Sarah Darer Littman (A YAL story about the consequences of cell phones) <i>Almost American Girl</i> by Robin Ha (disconnect Robin feels not being able to connect with her friends once she moved to

Table 2 Continued

			America)
“New Boy” (Short Film)	A new kid at school is picked on by a classmate. The new kid has flashbacks and reminisces about his old school in a different country and how it functioned differently.	Bullying, racism, cultural differences, school, trauma	Try pairing with: <i>New Kid</i> by Jerry Craft (Thematic similarities: racism, school) <i>Almost American Girl</i> by Robin Ha (Thematic similarities: bullying, racism, cultural differences, school)
"Human" by Yann Arthus-Bertrand (Documentary Series)	A documentary with many different stories, voices to be heard from all walks of life. Tip: This is a very lengthy series. Pick a few stories to share rather than showing the series entirety. Even watching the trailer can be an excellent conversation starter.	Love, tragedies, abuse, healing, partnership, what it means to be human	Pairings will shift depending on sections of the film chosen to view with students.
“Anxiety” by Michael D. Smigiel Jr. (Short Film)	A girl has the house to herself. She struggles with her anxiety whispering lies to her, and fights to ignore it.	Anxiety, self-esteem, body image, identity	Try pairing with: <i>Teen Titans: Raven</i> by Kami Garcia (Thematic similarities: anxiety, identity) <i>Superman Smashes the Klan</i> (Thematic similarities: anxiety, self-esteem, identity)
“Let’s Eat” (Short Film)	A story of an Asian-American home, about a mother and daughter’s	Mother daughter relationship, loss, grief,	Try pairing with:

Table 2 Continued

	relationship through time and how food brought them together.	importance of time, importance of traditional food	<i>Almost American Girl</i> by Robin Ha (Robin feels a connection to home whenever she has opportunity to eat food similar to the food in her previous home country) <i>The Round House</i> by Louise Erdrich (Traditional foods plays a large part in Erdrich's novel)
"Who We Are" by Alexis Anoruk Sallee (Short Film)	This short film shows beautiful Alaskan scenery as an Indigenous woman recites poetic explanations of who the people are, as she takes on painting to embrace her heritage.	Heritage, embracing traditional practices, land heritage, seeing Indigenous people	Try pairing with texts that honor Indigenous people: <i>The Round House</i> by Louise Erdrich <i>Surviving the City</i> by Tasha Spillett & Natasha Donovan <i>Sugar Falls</i> by David A. Robertson Short stories from <i>Moonshot: The Indigenous Comics Collection</i> Poems from

Table 2 Continued

			<i>An American Sunrise</i> by Joy Harjo
Shang-Chi and the Legend of the 10 Rings (Movie)	Shang-Chi faces trials to understand his connections to his father and his mother. Trying to decide what being related to his “evil” father means about himself. He goes on a journey to reconnect with his sister, and stop his father from releasing evil from a mountain.	Family, culture, language and linguistics, social media, heritage, friendship, fantasy, heroism	Try pairing with: <i>American Born Chinese</i> by Gene Luen Yang (Thematic similarities include: family, culture, stereotyping that includes language and linguistics, heritage, and fantasy) <i>Long Way Down</i> by Jason Reynolds (graphic novel or typographic novel) (Thematic similarities: trying to break away from family and/or cultural traditions to become something/so meone better; fantasy)
Persepolis (Movie)	An animated full length movie adaptation of <i>Persepolis</i> by Marjane Satrapi that honors her life story and her artwork style.	Family, Iranian revolution, war, childhood, coming of age	Try pairing with: <i>Persepolis</i> by Marjane Satrapi <i>They Called Us Enemy</i> by George Takei (Thematic

Table 2 Continued

			Similarity: child narrator/main character faces the repercussions of an adult waged war) <i>Almost American Girl</i> by Robin Ha (Thematic Similarity: Discovering oneself in a different country)
The Hate U Give (Movie)	Based off Angie Thomas' book <i>The Hate U Give</i>. Star's lifelong friend is shot by a cop. She struggles to come forward with a statement, but learns to find her voice through activism.	Social justice, #BLM, activism, community, friendship, family	Try pairing with: <i>Surviving the City</i> by Tasha Spillett and Natasha Donovan (Thematic similarity: social justice, activism, community, friendship, family) <i>The Hate U Give</i> by Angie Thomas
Black Panther (Movie)	T'Challa goes home to Africa after his father dies to become king. T'Challa undergoes a journey to protect his people by being the Black Panther	Family, African fantasy, heroism, leadership, trial, race, identity, colonization	Try pairing with: <i>Afar</i> by Leila Del Duca and Kit Seaton (Thematic similarities: family, African fantasy, heroism, identity)

Student Responses to Stories

As thematic units come together with mini text sets for students to choose from, films for students to explore together, and questions to guide them, teachers can begin to think about how they are going to keep

record of what the

students are learning.

How do grades and

responses factor into

thematic units? Again,

the way students are

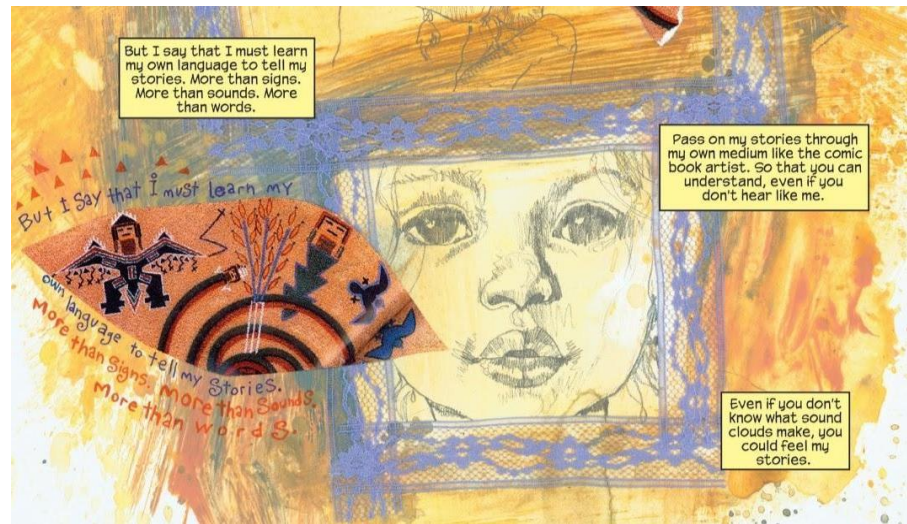
graded is going to

change from classroom

to classroom based on

Figure 14

Stories Told through Personal Mediums



David Mack, 2015

student preferences and needs. There is a need to break away from testing memorized knowledge and to create a classroom that presents students with information and then allows them to create something new with it— to embody what they've learned and to apply it (Gallagher, 2015;

Morrell, 2020). Giving students time to work through their thought processes, granting students opportunities to explore their thoughts in multiple modalities (to choose or create their own

medium as Echo states in Figure 14) will free up the way they think and hone their skills in

multiple fields. Students should be allowed room to explore their thoughts before they enter the realm of Q&A, before jumping into verbal discussion or a project. Many teachers allow students

to journal as they read as a way to respond to the text (Kittle, 2013 & Miller, 2009). I propose

that teachers should consider encouraging students to sketch in their journals as well. Where

words may fall short, they may be able to express their thoughts and connect to the text through art. Personal responses may also take shape in a blog rather than a journal, or a voice recording for students who process their thoughts better when they speak out loud. Even NCTE (2018) recognizes all these creations as forms of writing, forms of expression. The important piece here is that students are allowed the room and the creativity to explore their thoughts without the shadow of a looming grade or a red ink pen muddying their thoughts (Murray, 1972). While much of the thematic unit structure is designed to foster students that think critically and empathetically about the stories of other people, it is also important that they have the room and space to explore their own stories and make meanings of their own existence, which is equally as important (Thomas, 2019; Bishop, 1990; Thomsen, 2018). Granting students time to do this as individuals without looming grades over their heads will give them space to consider the whole picture. And, once they've had the time to explore their thoughts as individuals, then a project or assignment could be given for grading purposes.

Inviting Art Projects into ELA Classrooms

As students finish up their thematic units, after diving into the novels of their choice, watching films and engaging in the teacher's activities, that is generally when a writing project surfaces. While writing is extremely important and should remain at the forefront of the classroom alongside reading, art should also take a stance at the forefront, as it is a prominent modality people use to communicate. When teachers allow students to show their voice through artwork too, students who may have struggled sharing their voice before, may be able to share it prominently through their own artwork. Students who didn't know they were able to express themselves through art, will have opportunity to explore that aspect of themselves. Students need

to be creating images in the classroom, thoughtfully, because they are already engaging with images both by consuming them and producing them (TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, etc.) on a daily basis (Thomsen, 2018; Ayotte & Collins, 2017).

The expression through art, as seen in this research paper, can be used for self-expression, and as an action towards social justice, making the knowledge of how to use art even more important. Benjamin Lee Hicks (2020) wrote that "Drawing is an action that can embody the magic of our strength, creativity, and grace at the same time that it refuses to disregard the violence of apathy, silence, and inaction" (p.189). Images are powerful and possess power. When students understand how to use them, they can construct their own identities and mold their own realities consciously through their own constructions of image (Thomsen, 2018, p. 54). Teachers can use art as a way to show students how to be activists and how they can use art to promote awareness without being art teachers. When teachers provide students visual narratives to read, to critically analyze, and to absorb the artwork within, students can mimic and begin to produce artwork that speaks to who they are and what they believe in.

When grading student artwork, it is important to note, and to emphasize to our students that the importance does not rest on them creating "a priceless piece of art," but should rest on the fact that "they created something" (Thomsen, 2018, p. 54). More importantly, they created a representation of their own "thinking" (Germán, 2021, p.110).

Again, an emphasis on choice is important in allowing students to express their experiences and their knowledge to the best of their ability in a modality that speaks to them. Here is a short list to foster thinking about how art can be critically incorporated into the curriculum. I would even suggest considering offering this full list to students and see where it takes them. The neat thing about incorporating artistic projects is that teachers don't have to say

goodbye to writing. Having students create a project that uses both art and writing skills is simpler than it sounds. Even a project that is full of art, like a painting, can be accompanied with an abstract. Abstract requirements can be adjusted per teacher's preferences, but can be used for students to thoroughly express how their artistic component relates to the thematic unit using grammatical and organizational skills (which may be assessed per teacher's disclosure). Here is a list of potential projects teachers may present to students for them to pursue. Of course, these can be adjusted to require additional or different components per the students or teachers' preferences and needs:

- Comic strip: Using a blank comic panel print out, blank paper, or an app like Procreate or Pixton.com students may create a comic strip.
 - i.e., their own creative spin on a chapter, their own personal story that connects to the theme, prose novel chapter recreated as a comic.
- Short film: A student or student group uses a recording device to film their own interpretation of the novel, their own story based on the themes, etc.
- Graphic essay: An essay that uses images to further their explanation, ideas, and thought processes
- Commercials: Students use video recording devices to film a commercial on their given (preferably chosen) topic(s).
- News Report: Students use video or audio recording devices to create a news report on: an event from the read book, real world events that connect to the thematic unit, etc.
- Posters: Students use both written words and images to present their idea(s) visually: this could be by reflecting a theme from what they read, or to present research on a topic, etc.

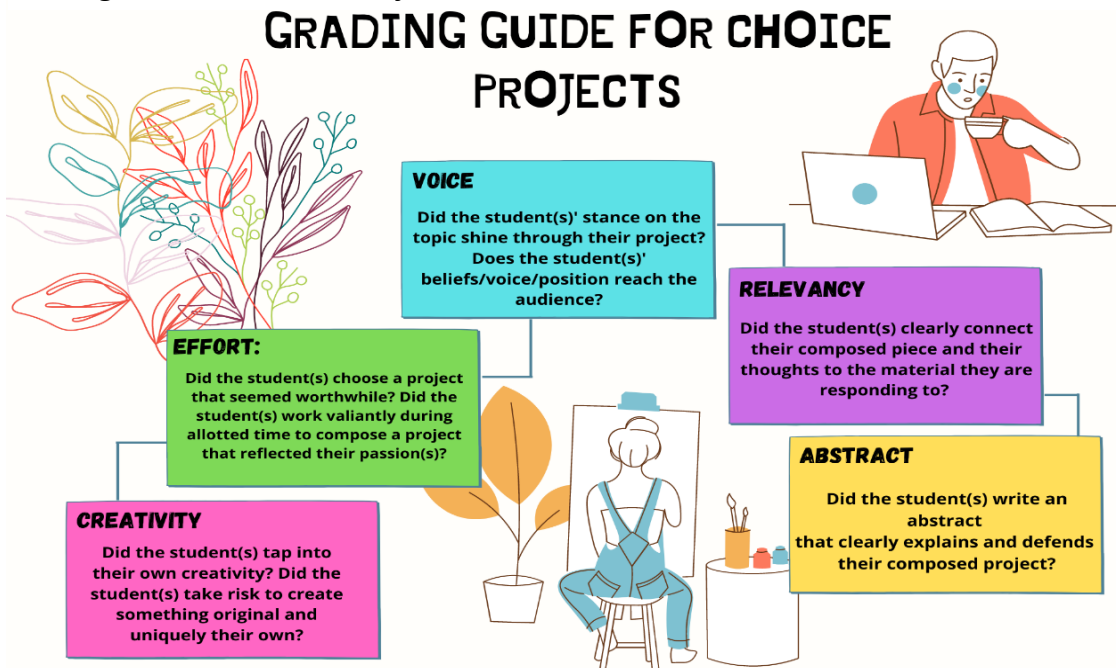
- Multimodal Blog Post(s): Students use a blog website to put together a blog post about a specific theme or idea using words, images, slideshows, voiceovers, etc. (Sites to consider: WordPress, Weebly, Wix, Blogger)
- Poetic Art: Students write poems and artistically present them (i.e., a blackout poem with drawn or painted images around the words that represent a theme, a poem voiced over a short animation)
- Newspaper: Using poster board (or whatever paper is available; or an online medium), students can create a newspaper based on the story they've read/seen. Newspapers might include: cover page, articles in columns, photos, classified ads, obituaries, news, sports, cartoons, etc.
- Rap: Student writes and performs a rap based on the text or the themes in the text
- Art Exhibit: Student creates "X" amount of art pieces (set by teacher, i.e.: four pieces, each based on a different theme in the text), and displays them.
- Song/Poem Select and Analysis: Student researches to find "X" number of songs and/or poems that match up with the themes in the text. They share their findings, and write an abstract to explain how each finding connects with the text material.
- Body Biography: Students use a poster board (or a drawing app), to create a body biography of one (or more) of the characters from the novel. Poster should include the character's inner and outer characteristics: what their feelings and motives are internally, who they like and who they are at odds with, etc.
- Write a Script and Act it Out: Take a scene, rewrite the scene in play form, then choose a group of volunteers to help act the play out or make this a group project.

Grading Choice Projects:

Now that the students have chosen different texts to read and different ways of responding to those texts through their chosen project, how can a teacher fairly grade across differences? Often, teachers struggle to give choice projects due to the grading and point system varying. Ideally a rubric for an art project is going to look quite different than a rubric for a five-paragraph essay. However, the importance of choice projects is too important to allow a little math to prevent teachers from moving forward with allowing students to choose how they wish to express what they've learned. In my blog post "Leaving Tradition: Reading and Writing Toward Understanding and Social Justice (A Framework)" I created this grading guide (2021). There are no numbers because different schools, classrooms, teachers, and projects are going to be weighed differently. However, hopefully these guiding questions can assist in having a rubric that comfortably grades projects across modalities:

Figure 15

Grading Guide for Choice Projects



Tasheena Erickson, 2021

CONCLUSION

This paper is a start, a guide, a beacon, a call for teachers to foster more active, inclusive ELA classrooms. Closely listening and observing enables people to see beyond first impressions, to dig deeper, and to see the human being in all stories, in all scenarios. As Germán (2021) warns that being exclusive with the literary canon murders BIPOC communities, pulling in the voices of those silenced gives them life. Teachers and students alike must open their hearts to hear more stories, to believe the truths of others, and take the steps they can to honor individuality, to appreciate the arts, to open their minds to all people in this vast world. Learning to listen across modalities grants people the ability to be more empathetic to those around them. Teachers and students who embark on a journey to refine their listening skills through the study of visual narratives should find themselves enchanted with a new tool box to use while interacting on a daily basis. Visual narratives, when viewed and listened to deeply, help readers and viewers grow as human beings; the visual form of storytelling is an opening to a dimension where stories can be more than heard, but also be seen.

Connecting together across differences, across modalities and preferences, worldviews will grow. It is paramount for people to realize the world they live in, who they are, and who others are, so they may take change where needed. Learning to listen empathetically, being a witness to the journeys of others and learning how to support fellow humans is part of what it is to be a human being.

This thematic unit framework created in this paper is only the start of a journey and only one way to experience the journey. From here teachers must dive even deeper, explore stories more vastly, and become better listeners in their daily lives. Teachers who work towards improving classroom curriculums by diversifying what is being taught and how will find

themselves growing in that process as I have grown in this one. Somewhere along the line the talk of change will turn into action. Action that may stop injustices, action that will be inclusive of the BIPOC community as main characters in curriculum, action that will honor differences as people learn to be witnesses across cultures, across races, across modalities.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

THE CONE EFFECT HANDOUT

