“A War Between Stories”

An Exploration of Counternarratives as a Prism for Classroom Anti-Oppressive Practice

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Background

"Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize" (Adichie, 2009). As an English Secondary School teacher in Vancouver's public school system, I have a significant interest in stories. My teaching career began 13 years ago, and the arc of my practice has coincided with a wider shifting social understanding of oppressive forces. As I grew more comfortable with teaching as a vocation, the #metoo and Black Lives Matter movements challenged my understanding of what and why I did what I did. I became increasingly aware that, as someone whose job it is to teach younger people about which stories mattered, and which ones get told by whom and to whom, I needed to better understand anti-oppressive practices. I recall walking into the staff English book room, already a site of contestation for teachers' practices and views, jockeying within a limited budget, and seeing how well-represented white male voices were. I started by challenging myself to teach authors who were not white men for several years; this opened a rich but limited period of my practice. The analyses and the discussions among my students were more robust and more relevant, but it still felt limited in terms of what I could be doing as an English teacher. Increasingly, I felt keenly aware of my positionality: as a white, young, cisgendered, straight, financially stable, able-bodied, male settler, among many other layers of privilege, it felt important for me to be seen opening doors for the representation of other groups. However, while I was certainly representing the literature of many different demographics, I didn't feel I was allowing students effective avenues to explore, or assert, their own identities. A paradigm shift happened for me when I was introduced to the concept of students writing counternarratives.

Four years ago, I agreed to participate in a project with Simon Fraser University's Dr. Robyn Ilten-Gee, who was conducting research with teachers exploring Critical Media

Literacy[1]. At this time, I was teaching *Hamilton: An American Musical* in New Media 10 (British Columbia, 2018). We agreed to incorporate the concept of counternarratives into the unit, by asking students to consider whether the musical should be considered a counternarrative, and then to create their own: they could either tell a story of their own life, or retell a popular story as a counternarrative. The analysis of the musical was exciting and fruitful, but what shifted my understanding of anti-oppressive teaching was seeing the results of the students' own creations. Students who identified within traditionally oppressed groups, such as students of colour, students with disabilities, and students in the 2SLGBTQIAA+ community, thrived when asked to create their own stories - they seemed to more intuitively understand the way many popular stories reinforced power structures, and were more capable in inserting their own identities into the process. Students who didn't identify with any perceptible marginalized group, however, tended to struggle to even understand the concept of a Master narrative. This initially piqued my interest, and made me wonder: what was it about counternarratives that made marginalized students thrive, and how could I adapt the project so that everyone else could also thrive?

My interest was further strengthened once Dr. Ilten-Gee published her findings (Ilten-Gee et al, 2022). She noted that while I encouraged students to create their own fictional counternarratives, the definition I had used specifically stated that counternarratives couldn't be fictional (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002, p. 36). I realized that I had used two separate definitions with students without seeing the difference: one by Hilde Lindemann Nelson (2001) (which allows for fictional counternarratives), and another by Daniel G. Solórzano and Tara J. Yosso (2002). Both definitions will be explored at length, later in this paper. This highlighted for me that the scholarly conversation around counternarratives might be contested, and that I would benefit from a greater understanding of the theories and research of real-life practices. I have since oriented much of my studies in my Master's

[1] "Critical media literacy thus constitutes a critique of mainstream approaches to literacy and a political project for democratic social change. This involves a multi-perspectival critical inquiry, of popular culture and the culture industries, that addresses issues of class, race, gender, sexuality, and power and also promotes the production of alternative counter-hegemonic media." (Mirra et al, 2018, p. 14)

program towards better understanding the theory and practice of counternarratives. This is not only because I want to strengthen that particular unit in New Media 10, but because I suspect that gaining a better understanding of how counternarratives work can lead towards other anti-oppressive practices that I don't yet know about.

Ultimately, through practice and research, I believe that counternarratives are a useful, expandable, anti-oppressive prism[2] for students and educators to engage with. Because their complexity shifts with each classroom's context, they are worthy of better understanding from me and from other teachers. This paper represents the results of this ongoing effort to better understand theories related to counternarratives, and to relay my findings to any other teacher who may be interested in the idea.

Findings

To begin this study, I offer the most succinct definition of counternarratives that I found to date: "Counterstories counter master narratives" (Lindemann Nelson 2001, p.153)[3]. I break down the paper into four broad questions related to producing counternarratives: What? How? Why? And Who? To answer "What?" this paper begins by relaying my understanding of the research I conducted around Master narratives, since it is difficult to counter them if we don't understand them. I will then explore different definitions of what a counternarrative is. I then explore the role that Intersectionality plays in understanding what Master narratives and counternarratives are. The two sections thereafter consider "How?" by examining effective ways for students to create counternarratives, and the importance of distributing them properly within society. Following that, I'll consider "Why?" by offering pedagogical justifications for centering counternarratives as anti-oppressive prisms of

[2] I struggled with the best word to use here, and originally used the word "tool," partly because it is a term that Nelson uses: "counterstories serve as *practical* tools for reidentifying persons" (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p.186). I chose the word prism because I felt like it metaphorically captures the complexity of teaching counternarratives: they're similar to lenses, but what you see shifts depending on angles and environment. And in the end, they're beautiful, and create beautiful things.

[3] Note: for the purposes of this paper, counternarratives and counterstories are used interchangeably.

understanding in classrooms. At this point, I will shift to “Who?” This section will offer a literature review of some existing examples of research on counternarratives, created by youths, students, and teachers, to better inform my practice. Finally, I will finish with what I hope is an accessible “how-to” guide for teachers who are interested in this topic, distilled for those who don’t have the time and resources to complete an entire Master’s degree focused on the idea.

Ultimately, counternarratives can be an effective prism that empowers students to consider anti-oppressive praxis by applying their understanding of their own identities against hierarchical social systems. They are also messy; they are simple ideas to interact with in a theoretical sense, but quickly encounter real-life oppressive and personal situations in a practical sense. While the term counternarrative and master narrative[4] are used in multiple fields, including organizational theory, narrative theory, and legal theory, I decided to focus my theoretical exploration largely on the work of literary theorists of counternarratives: Lindemann Nelson, Daniel G. Solórzano and Tara J. Yosso, and Richard Delgado. For the review of research on counternarratives, while I found many articles to examine, I decided to focus on three scholarly articles that I thought offered a broad sampling of lessons to consider: “‘Just Like I Have Felt’: Multimodal Counternarratives in Youth-Produced Digital Media” by Jen Scott Curwood and Damiana Gibbons (2010), “Storytelling as engagement: Learning from youth voices in Attawapiskat” by Sarah Marie Wiebe (2020), and “Counternarratives as DisCrit Praxis: Disrupting Classroom Master Narratives Through Imagined Composite Stories,” by Mallory A. Locke, Valerie Guzman, Armineh E Hallaran, Migdalia Arciegas, Tanya E. Friedman, and Adela Brito (2022). Each article focuses on different facets of counternarratives in different environments, which I found valuable to consider in how they affect my practice. In the end, the three articles confirmed my belief that counternarratives are useful prisms for a variety of different demographics, though I found research to be lacking in counternarratives as a classroom practice.

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[4] Or majoritorian or monovocal or single story, often used interchangeably.

What is a Master Narrative?

"There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says 'Morning, boys. How's the water?' And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes 'What the hell is water?'" (Wallace, 2005). Master narratives are tricky, because to the dominant groups in society they simply reflect the normal state of affairs; in many ways, the stories are the water that the fish swim in. Before teaching about what a counternarrative is, I have found it helpful to start with what a Master narrative is. I'll begin this section by sharing Lindemann Nelson's definition of what a Master narrative is:

> [They are the] stories found lying about in our culture that serve as summaries of socially shared understandings. Master narratives are often archetypal, consisting of stock plots and readily recognizable character types, and we use them not only to make sense of our experience (Nisbett and Ross 1980) but also to justify what we do (MacIntyre 1984). As the repositories of common norms, master narratives exercise a certain authority over our moral imaginations and play a role in informing our moral intuitions. Our culture's foundation myths - the Passion of the Christ, for example, or Washington Crossing the Delaware - are master narratives. So are the best-known fairy tales, landmark court cases, canonical works of great literature, movie classics. (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 6-7)

I find Lindemann Nelson's explanation of Master narratives to be a helpful starting point, in part because of its broad definition, and its inclusion of specific examples. A Master narrative doesn't necessarily need to be a cohesive, universally malevolent story, but rather can be fragments or ideas of stories that are generally accepted and unquestioned by society. They "inform our moral intuitions," in that students and educators are often unaware that what feels intuitive is often shaped by the stories around us, and the difficulty is in recognizing, critiquing, and resisting them. In this sense, their perniciousness can lie in how pervasive and unchallenged they are; we all grow up with ideas that feel self-evident because they are never challenged. It brings to mind how often a conversation has turned on a cliché or a maxim (For example: "Well, the early bird catches the worm"), since these small stories are so widely accepted. Because they are not even always complete stories, it sometimes

doesn't occur to people to challenge them in the first place. In this sense, the difficulty for the classroom teacher becomes apparent: in effect, step one is to teach students to see the "water" they're swimming in (this will be explored more in the section on Intersectionality), to see how many Master narratives exist in society, how they interact with each other, and how we interact with them.

Richard Delgado, working within the theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory[5] in legal scholarship, offers a similar definition, reinforcing how Master narratives are designed to appear to be the normal state of the world (he uses the term "ingroup" as the dominant forces in society, and "outgroup" as the marginalized):

> The dominant group creates its own stories, as well. The stories or narratives told by the ingroup remind it of its identity in relation to outgroups, and provide it with a form of shared reality in which its own superior position is seen as natural (Delgado, 1989, p. 2412)

Delgado expands on this definition:

> They are like eyeglasses we have worn a long time. They are nearly invisible; we use them to scan and interpret the world and only rarely examine them for themselves. Ideology - the received wisdom - makes current social arrangements seem fair and natural. Those in power sleep well at night - their conduct does not seem to them like oppression. (Delgado, 1989, p. 2413-14)

I find his metaphor of "eyeglasses" to be helpful, and similar to the metaphor above about the water we swim in: Not only are master narratives difficult to even see, they're even harder to remember in the day-in-day-out nature of life, especially when their purpose is to reinforce confirmation bias: if you have privilege in the world, it is "fair and natural," not "oppression." There is little incentive to resist stories that help you "sleep well at night." Both definitions share how Master narratives function as a means of reinforcing the status quo, almost as though through a sleepy, all-encompassing story for society. They can be

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[5]Solórzano and Yosso define: "critical race theory advances a strategy to foreground and account for the role of race and racism in education and works toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of opposing or eliminating other forms of subordination based on gender, class, sexual orientation, language, and national origin" (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002, p. 25)

incredibly difficult to resist because they are incredibly difficult to see - particularly for those in power.

The third definition I would like to include more specifically relates to racism. Solórzano and Yosso, similarly writing within the framework of CRT, highlight how difficult Master narratives are to see: “Because ‘majoritarian’ stories generate from a legacy of racial privilege, they are stories in which racial privilege seems ‘natural’” (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002, p. 28). They also acknowledge: “a majoritarian story is one that privileges Whites, men, the middle and/or upper class, and heterosexuals by naming these social locations as natural or normative points of reference” (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002, p. 28). Concepts like “natural” and “normative” echo the definitions provided above, and speak to how slippery and effective Master narratives are at propping up social structures. Speaking to the difficulty of challenging such a normative power, Lindemann Nelson offers an example: “narratives with courtship and marriage plots - ‘Cinderella,’ *Gone with the Wind* - attend so thoroughly to the norms of heterosexuality that same-sex relationships simply don’t exist” (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 163). How can students notice that queer people are an oppressed group, if story after story don’t even acknowledge their existence? While certainly queer students are likely to notice this lack of representation, straight students, and students who have not yet identified as queer, may not. The same lesson can be applied to any category of oppression, which highlights the challenges - and benefits - of bringing the concept into the classroom. Master narratives, in other words, set the terms of social understanding for a variety of different forms of oppression.

Personally, I have found the concept of a Master narrative to be intuitive once it is shared, and different authors have, I would argue, explored the concept without actually naming it in the same way. Solórzano and Yosso use multiple different words to describe Master narratives: “Whether we refer to them as monovocals, master narratives, standard stories, or majoritarian stories, it is important to recognize the power of White privilege in constructing stories about race” (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002, p. 28). One of the complexities

in researching Master narratives is that many different texts refer to them, but will often use different terms or will explore only limited aspects of what Lindemann Nelson might consider to be a Master narrative. Consider Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's point about what she calls the "Single Story" (an unquestioned, flat story told in society): "The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story" (Adichie, 2009). When I consider the idea that a single story may be another understanding of a Master narrative, I found this to be a refreshing take on how they affect us: stereotypes also contribute to Master narratives about the world, and like most Master narratives, are slippery and difficult to resist because we cannot always call them untrue. Some stereotypes *are* true, but the challenge is in complicating them to bring humanity to the subjects. In other words, labelling stereotypes as "incomplete" is a call for complexity in storytelling. Similarly, Kimberlé Crenshaw, in her groundbreaking work "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics" (1989), similarly addresses master narratives without naming them as such:

> the failure to embrace the complexities of compoundedness is not simply a matter of political will but is also due to the influence of a way of thinking about discrimination which structures politics so that struggles are categorized as singular issues. Moreover, this structure imports a descriptive and normative view of society that reinforces the status quo (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 166-67)

Crenshaw in many ways is similarly calling for complexity, as a counterpoint to the desire to categorize and flatten the stories that society tells. While she is discussing these concepts within legal scholarship, the quote above points out that it is due to "a way of thinking," which is pervasive in society. Though not always named the same, Master narratives are a source of preoccupation for many writers.

As has been established, Master narratives are pervasive and difficult to oppose. They're also remarkably adaptable and affect everyone. Lindemann Nelson summarizes some of their abilities:

> Counterstories are up against a formidable foe. The master narratives they set out to resist are capable of hiding what ought to be opposed, of absorbing such

> opposition as might be offered, of penetrating so deeply into a belief-system as to be uprooted only at great cost, of spreading their nets so widely across the culture that localized resistance can make no headway against them (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 164)

Because they spread widely, and affect everyone, then what's at stake in understanding Master narratives is understanding how they can affect the perception of identity. Lindemann Nelson notes: "A key component of identity is the people around you, who must recognize that the identity is properly yours. Indeed, often these others keep one's practical identities in place by themselves taking up reciprocal or related roles and identities" (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 82). Echoing her earlier description, recognition of identities are constructed through story: "Personal identities are complicated narrative constructions consisting of a fluid and continual interaction of the many stories and fragments of stories that are created around the things that seem most important, from either the first-or the third-person perspective, about a person's life over time" (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 106). Another way to consider the challenge ahead: Master narratives reinforce the status quo for those in power, are remarkably adaptable and pervasive, and play a significant role in shaping everyone's identity.

Just how much damage does a Master narrative do? This is obviously impossible to fully gauge. Lindemann Nelson points out that it is wrong to assume that a Master narrative is inherently bad: "Many master narratives are benign and indeed socially indispensable, since they figure heavily in our ability to make sense of ourselves and one another" (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 152). Indeed, some stories that float around society are good, or at the very least, convenient: "Master narratives serve as a kind of shortcut that saves us the trouble of having to create a story out of whole cloth" (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 84). While there are master narratives that can be positive or benign, central to the importance of studying Master narratives is that their existence can be harmful:

> Although oppression always damages people's identities by depriving them of opportunity, it frequently also has a second kind of destructive impact. A person's identity is twice damaged by oppression when she internalizes as a self-understanding the hateful or dismissive views that other people have of her (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 21)

So, to summarize: Master narratives are pervasive, socially shared, often unchallenged stories that are inspired by a variety of different sources. While a portion of them are benign, they can often be used to reinforce the status quo by encouraging narratives of the current or traditional society as normative, which can deprive the oppressed of opportunities, and damage their self-understanding. One way to combat Master narratives is to develop counternarratives. The next section will examine theories about what they are.

What are Counternarratives?

"There is a war between stories. They contend for, tug at, our minds" (Delgado, 2418). While I would argue that there is general consensus about the nature and danger of Master narratives in the scholarly literature, it is difficult to know how to approach creating a counternarrative. To begin this conversation with my students, I show them this poster, after defining Master narratives to them:

(Marvel Studios, 2019)

Considering *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) was a widely popular movie, and enough years have passed that most students have seen it, I start with: “What Master narratives are present in this poster? Which identities are emphasized or marginalized? What about the movie itself?” After highlighting several different ways in which posters and films such as this reinforce the hierarchical status quo, I’ll ask them: “What might be the value in creating a counternarrative to this? How do we create a counternarrative *against* this story?” This is tricky, and so we must start with some definitions.

To define counternarratives, I begin once again with Lindemann Nelson. Quite simply, she defines a counterstory as “a story that resists an oppressive identity and attempts to replace it with one that commands respect” (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 6). She expands on this definition throughout her book *Damaged Identities; Narrative Repair* (2001), including: “Counterstories redefine a past that has been, until now, characterized incorrectly. They take a story that has (for the moment at least) been determined, undo it, and reconfigure it with a new significance” (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 18). She also points out

that they are “useful tools for participating directly in practices of personal, interpersonal, or political responsibility” (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 66). Additionally, “the proper target of a counterstory is a master narrative that has been generated by an abusive power system to impose on a particular group an identity the system requires” (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 155). Perhaps most cohesively, she offers this thought: “Counterstories, typically told within the moral space of *a community of choice*, are *stories of self-definition*, developed in response to the twin harms of *deprivation of opportunity* and *infiltrated consciousness*” (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 9). Her concepts of “community of choice” and “self-definition” point to more specific questions. Can a counternarrative only be properly made in a chosen community, rather than a forced community like a classroom? Does “self-definition” mean that counternarratives can only be made by students about themselves, and not others? Other definitions similarly point to these elements as important aspects of counternarratives.

I found it helpful to examine more specific theories of counternarratives, and found some rich concepts once again with Delgado, and Solórzano and Yosso. Delgado notes the purpose of creating counternarratives:

> what could be loosely described as outgroups, groups whose marginality defines the boundaries of the mainstream, whose voice and perspective - whose consciousness - has been suppressed, devalued, and abnormalized. The attraction of stories for these groups should come as no surprise. For stories create their own bonds, represent cohesion, shared understandings, and meanings. The cohesiveness that stories bring is part of the strength of the outgroup. An outgroup creates its own stories, which circulate within the group as a kind of counter-reality (Delgado, 1989, p. 2412)

This echoes some of the details that Lindemann Nelson notes, especially regarding community and the purpose of counternarratives - they can be shared with like-minded people. There is refuge, and a safe place to build stories, by sharing them within your community. In Delgado’s example, the stories can strengthen the cohesion of the “outgroup.” He adds:

> Oppressed groups have known instinctively that stories are an essential tool to their own survival and liberation. Members of outgroups can use stories in two basic ways: first, as means of psychic self-preservation; and, second, as means

> of lessening their own subordination. These two means correspond to the two perspectives from which a story can be viewed - that of the teller, and that of the listener. The storyteller gains psychically, the listener morally and epistemologically. (Delgado, 1989, p. 2436-37)

Thus far, it appears that counternarratives are stories created within and about a community of marginalized people, with the aim of (a) improving their understanding of their self-perception within an oppressive environment, and (b) complexifying the dominant group's perception of them.

Solórzano and Yosso offer a much more specific definition of counternarratives, within the context of Critical Race Theory:

> We define the counter-story as a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society). The counter-story is also a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege. Counter-stories can shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform. Yet, counter-stories need not be created only as a direct response to majoritarian stories. (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002, 32)

They add:

> We believe counter-stories serve at least four functions as follows: (a) They can build community among those at the margins of society by putting a human and familiar face to educational theory and practice, (b) they can challenge the perceived wisdom of those at society's center by providing a context to understand and transform established belief systems, (c) they can open new windows into the reality of those at the margins of society by showing possibilities beyond the ones they live and demonstrating that they are not alone in their position, and (d) they can teach others that by combining elements from both the story and the current reality, one can construct another world that is richer than either the story or the reality alone. (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002, p. 36)

In addition to echoing the above definitions in their emphasis on communities strengthening their identity by creating the stories, and altering the perception of the dominant group, this definition also highlights the hope of a counternarrative to "construct another world." In other words, counternarratives are a call for complexity, and a richer imagination.

Thus far, I have established multiple concepts of what constitutes a Master narrative, and by contrast, what constitutes a counternarrative. While these two ideas in theory are

relatively understandable, and I found that students in the classroom could grasp them, the challenge is next to identify the social structures that are behind Master narratives, in order to properly construct a counternarrative. Lindemann Nelson offers some guidance for how to identify weaknesses in Master narratives, where a counternarrative might flourish: “When several master narratives work together to constitute a world view, a counterstory can be lodged in the fissures and cracks that are formed at the interstices, since the narratives are almost sure to not fit together smoothly” (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p.166). Because Master narratives are made up of multiple fragments of stories in society, and often reinforce each other, at times there may be hypocrisies or weaknesses to explore. For example:

> The tension that is created by a literal reading of verses of Scripture that pull in different directions, and the further tension caused by insisting on a literal reading of some verses of Scripture but not others, can be exploited by a counterstory. By engaging with the master narrative at these particular points, the counterstory can undermine the credibility of some of its parts (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p.165).

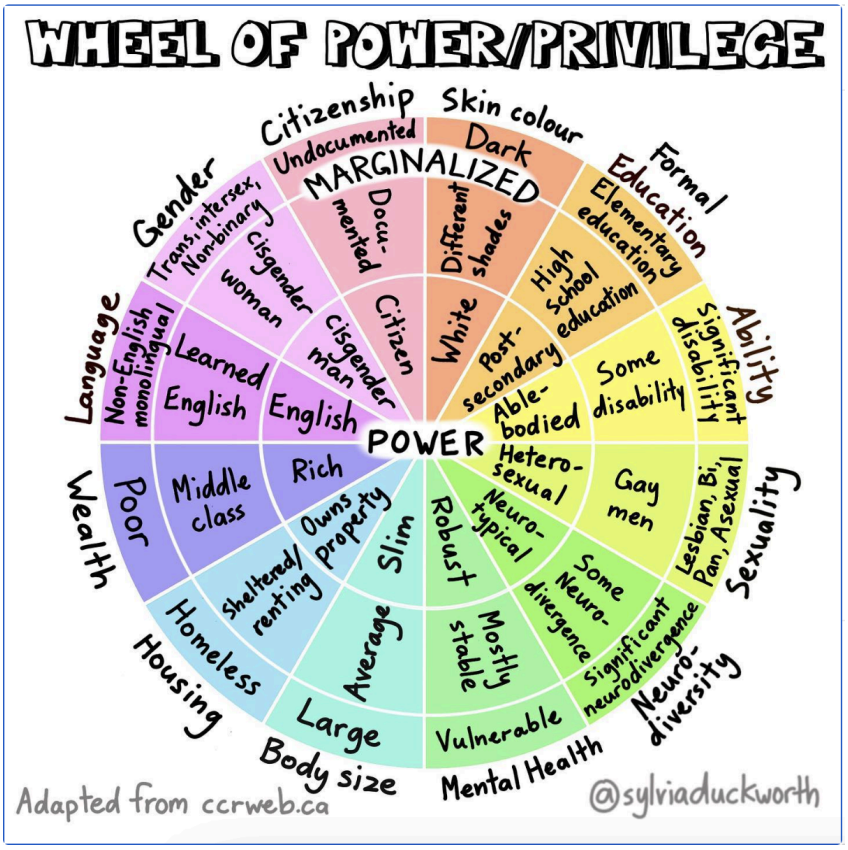
Similarly, she adds: “The final weakness of an oppressive master narrative lies in the gap between the norms of conduct that it prescribes for a particular class of people and how such people actually behave” (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 167). By learning to seek out and identify some of these weaknesses in Master narratives, students might then be able to sow the seeds for a counternarrative.

If we return to the poster of the movie *Endgame* armed with these definitions, students who are members of marginalized communities might ask: “In what ways do I belong to oppressed groups? How can I insert someone who looks like me into the center of this story?” Students who are members of a dominant community might ask: “What would this poster look like if I decentered certain voices? Or amplified other voices?” Or, put another way, all students could ask: “What superhero story could I create that resists some of the status quo that I see here”? How can a student know what Master narrative to resist with the counternarrative about the *Endgame* poster, if they cannot label the oppressive

forces behind the movie? In the next section, I explore how to approach categories of oppression, and the role of intersectionality.

What Role Does Intersectionality Play?

To kick off this conversation with high school students, I start by asking them to consider the chart below:



(Duckworth, 2020)

I start by briefly explaining how we might define “marginalized” and “power,” and then ask them: “Is this accurate? What is wrong? What is missing?” The purpose of the exercise is not to have them see this as fact, but to begin to think of different possible ways to view oppression. Every generation will have a different understanding of where oppression lies, and I have found that in some of the categories of the chart, high school students are far more knowledgeable than when I started my career - in particular, students seem far more

comfortable with discussions of race, gender, and sexual identity now than a decade ago. That being said, I have also found that conversations around class and ableism show a lack of understanding and consensus. The reason I point this out is that it is important to not only recognize that there are different categories of oppression and power, some not included in the chart, but that social recognition of those categories will be in constant flux. Additionally, each classroom will have different demographics and experiences, and they'll each have different reactions to my positionality as the teacher guiding them. It is not enough to simply come into the classroom and teach them about every single category; rather, oppression is an ongoing, shifting, generational conversation. This represents a significant and exciting challenge for teachers dedicated to anti-oppressive practice: how to teach about different forms of oppression, and how to recognize when they fluctuate - and also intersect.

Theories around intersectionality are by this point relatively well explored in academia, and the term has also become understood by much of the population at large. In terms of teaching in the classroom, however, it is useful to provide students with a better understanding. Solórzano and Yosso point out: "we argue that it is crucial to focus on the intersections of oppression because storytelling is racialized, gendered, and classed and these stories affect racialized, gendered, and classed communities. This means that when examining the experiences of students of color, a class-based theory or even a class-gender theory is insufficient" (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002, p. 31). This highlights the difficulty of the task by pointing to three specific forms of categorical oppression (race, gender, and class), but the call to consider more complex and interlocking theories can obviously apply to any intersection. Crenshaw succinctly points out the problem: "With Black women as the starting point, it becomes more apparent how dominant conceptions of discrimination condition us to think about subordination as disadvantage occurring along a single categorical axis" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140). Because many social conversations around oppression, especially at the high school level, rely on "a single categorical axis," it is challenging to break out from that valuable but limited perspective. Additionally, there must be a resistance

to turning the intersectionality of oppression into a mathematical formula: “Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140). What I appreciate about this quote is not only pointing out that forms of oppression differ, it also calls on centering the experience of the oppressed; rather than getting lost in conversations of categories, it’s helpful to remember the “particular manner” of each intersectional oppression. At the core of these discussions are actual people encountering actual oppression. She explains:

> Black women are regarded either as too much like women or Blacks and the compounded nature of their experience is absorbed into the collective experiences of either group or as too different, in which case Black women's Blackness or femaleness sometimes has placed their needs and perspectives at the margin of the feminist and Black liberationist agendas.
>
> While it could be argued that this failure represents an absence of political will to include Black women, I believe that it reflects an uncritical and disturbing acceptance of dominant ways of thinking about discrimination. (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 150)

Crenshaw’s call here, specifically regarding the legal consideration of Black women, highlights the importance of complicating the “uncritical and disturbing acceptance” of the status quo. The task at hand is to both highlight the categories in a chart like Duckworth’s, and speak to how they can compound each other in unique ways. Emphasizing the complexity of identity and oppression is central to understanding how Master narratives reinforce the status quo.

Having a strong understanding of the role of intersectionality is critical to being able to create an effective counternarrative. Central to that is to also see the way that it is not identity that is a problem, but rather how social structures harm those identities. Crenshaw offers a useful allegory to consider how to visualize the harmful stratification of society:

> Imagine a basement which contains all people who are disadvantaged on the basis of race, sex, class, sexual preference, age and/or physical ability. These people are stacked - feet standing on shoulders - with those on the bottom being

> disadvantaged by the full array of factors, up to the very top, where the heads of all those disadvantaged by a singular factor brush up against the ceiling. Their ceiling is actually the floor above which only those who are *not* disadvantaged in any way reside. In efforts to correct some aspects of domination, those above the ceiling admit from the basement only those who can say that "but for" the ceiling, they too would be in the upper room
>
> …
>
> Those who are multiply-burdened are generally left below unless they can somehow pull themselves into the groups that are permitted to squeeze through the hatch. (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 151-152)

This vivid metaphor calls attention not only to the accepted violence of such a system, but also to how the ceiling itself isn't questioned in this situation. If we consider Master narratives of oppression to be like the water we swim in, then the structure of this house she builds is similarly unnoticed. It appears benevolent to allow the "highest" people in, and it permits the entire structure to remain in place. Similarly, in her speech "On Intersectionality – Keynote - WOW, 2016" Crenshaw elaborates: "Intersectionality is not primarily about identity. It's about how structures make certain identities the consequence of and the vehicle for vulnerability" (Crenshaw, 2016). It is tempting to get bogged down in labelling categories of identity and their intersections, and while there is value in that process, while teaching about the role of intersectionality in studying Master narratives and counternarratives, it is important to remember that the attention should turn towards a thorough critique about the social structures that make people the "vehicle for vulnerability." The goal is to resist, and ultimately change, an oppressive structure, to reduce harm.

How Can Students Create Effective Counternarratives?

Who gets to tell a counternarrative, and what does it look like? In this section, I shift from exploring definitions that help with identification of Master narratives and counternarratives, towards the complexity of creating counternarratives within the specific

environment of a classroom (moving from “What?” to “How?”). To guide this, I offer a hypothetical question: If I have a student who is a white able-bodied man, and wants to tell a fictional counternarrative of a Black superhero woman in a wheelchair for an assignment, how might I respond? I consider this important because not only is creating a counternarrative complex, the difficulty is compounded by the public nature of my position as an English teacher: everyone needs to participate, but everyone identifies differently and has a different understanding of society and power. Some belong to dominant groups, and many belong to marginalized groups, and almost all of them have a complex mix of both. Thus, I now turn my attention towards the “how” of a counternarrative. The area of my research that I was most intrigued by, and did not end up receiving the catharsis that I was hoping for, was in how to judge exactly what constitutes an effective counternarrative within a context similar to what I do. What I found instead were several different concepts about what constitutes an effective counternarrative, and some of them were in tension.

An important element of an effective counternarrative appears to be how well it might be accepted by the dominant group. As Nelson states: “The possibility of the success of counterstories rests precisely on their engagement with master narratives that embody our publicly shared moral understandings; the possibility of their failure on their inability to shift those understandings” (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 67). In other words, a counternarrative must be effectively persuasive, and needs to strike at the logical heart of the specific oppression. Delgado offers a similar point: “Stories and counterstories, to be effective, must be or must appear to be noncoercive. They invite the reader to suspend judgment, listen for their point or message, and then decide what measure of truth they contain” (Delgado, 1989, p. 2415). In this sense, both authors are calling for a degree of empathy with the listener, to persuade them: their point is that a counternarrative is ineffective if it doesn’t change anything, and so the recipient needs to be considered. Delgado adds: “The story need not lead to a violent act; Frantz Fanon was wrong in writing that it is only through exacting blood from the oppressor that colonized people gain liberation. Rather, the story need only lead to

a realization of how one came to be oppressed and subjugated. Then, one can stop perpetrating (mental) violence on oneself" (Delgado, 1989, p. 2437). This is essentially a call for consideration and flexibility, depending on the identities and context involved. This calls to mind some of the concepts of Paulo Freire: "As the encounter of women and men seeking to be more fully human, dialogue cannot be carried on in a climate of hopelessness." (Freire, 1968, p.92). So, part of what makes a counternarrative is its intentionality: it needs to intend to engage with the hearts and minds of others, including the oppressors.

Additionally, the purpose of the counternarrative contributes to its effectiveness. Nelson offers some additional concepts in this regard:

> Counterstories, which root out the master narratives in the tissue of stories that constitute an oppressive identity and replace them with stories that depict the person as morally worthy, supply the necessary means of resistance. Here, resistance amounts to *repair*: the damaged identity is made whole. Through their function of narrative repair, counterstories thus open up the possibility that the person could attain, regain, or extend her freedom of moral agency. (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 150)

The ultimate purpose, then, is to extend someone's freedom. If the purpose doesn't change a person's reality, then it may not be considered an effective goal. She adds context for some pitfalls around what is not considered an effective counternarrative. For example:

> The story of the Noble Savage isn't a counterstory, because it doesn't aim to free the moral agency of the people it depicts… What keeps it from being a counterstory is that it's not part of the story to allow members of the subgroup access to the opportunities that are available to the dominant group, and this constricts the subgroup member's freedom to act. By contrast, counterstories set out to free a person's moral agency, rather than constrict it. (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 155)

Maintaining that the purpose is the freedom of agency of a marginalized group provides a helpful guide when navigating pitfalls of potentially bad counternarratives. One of my fears is that I inadvertently encourage a student to create a story that does more harm than good, like reinforcing stereotypes that appear benevolent, such as the Noble Savage motif. Similarly, the timing of stories is important. Counternarratives sometimes age, and become

Master narratives themselves, and some attempts at counternarratives come too late in the discussion: “They simply reflect a shift in a cultural understanding. Counterstories, by contrast, don’t merely *reflect* a shift in understanding. They set out to *cause* a shift” (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 156). A student recreating a counternarrative that already has been established by society, no matter how effective it was in the past, is simply reflecting the current cultural understanding, rather than resisting it. In this sense, the timing of a counternarrative matters, along with the content, to be effective.

So far, I have outlined some of the conditions considered as part of an effective counternarrative. Returning to the question that began this section - who gets to tell counternarratives - I found conflicting scholarly discussion. Solorzano offers a very specific vision of what constitutes a counternarrative:

> Critical race theory recognizes that the experiential knowledge of people of color is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination. In fact, critical race theorists view this knowledge as a strength and draw explicitly on the lived experiences of people of color by including such methods as storytelling, family histories, biographies, scenarios, parables, *cuentos*, *testimonios*, chronicles, and narratives. (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002, p. 26)

They add:

> Counter-storytelling is different from fictional storytelling. We are not developing imaginary characters that engage in fictional scenarios. Instead, the “composite” characters we develop are grounded in real-life experiences and actual empirical data and are contextualized in social situations that are also grounded in real life, not fiction. (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002, p. 36)

This is the definition where, as I noted earlier in this paper, Dr. Ilten-Gee had pointed out that I had used a definition that didn’t line up with what I taught students. Solórzano and Yosso’s definition clearly points out that my example of a hypothetical white, male, able-bodied student who wants to create a superhero of a Black woman in a wheelchair, would not be considered an appropriate counternarrative. His response would be fictional, and also would presumably not be based on personal experience. While this is a helpful limitation to understand, it’s also worth noting the context of Solórzano and Yosso’s definition: they are

speaking within the framework of CRT, particularly in scholarly educational research. It is a valuable stance to consider, but it may not be applicable to in-class practice for my purpose.

Nelson offers a different, broader perspective on who can tell a counternarrative, though there is some ambiguity in her understanding. She writes that counternarratives "are purposive acts of moral definition, developed on one's own behalf or on behalf of others" (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. Xiii). She adds that "counterstories can be created *by* or *for* the person whose identity needs repair" (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p.19). This would seem to imply a significantly different understanding of who gets to tell a story, where technically anyone can tell a counternarrative for someone else. This is obviously freeing, though it does raise ethical questions about how such stories can be told without becoming appropriating or pandering or patronizing. She also says that "Counterstories are stories of self-definition" (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 15). This raises the question: how can a story *for* another person be a story of "self-definition"? I struggled to find how Nelson connects these two ideas. While these concepts don't provide specific guidelines for students in the classroom, they do make it clear that this is a contested concept. In this sense, because I now have multiple theoretical frameworks to consider when it comes to classroom practice, it gives me permission to offer my own understanding. I imagine that I'll do my best to combine the theories based on my own understanding of my practice: I believe that a fictional story is acceptable for a high school project, but it should spring from self-definition. I'll unpack this more in the section below.

How Are Counternarratives Produced and Distributed?

This section outlines the steps that a student might consider when tasked with creating a counternarrative. To summarize the paper thus far: I have established what constitutes a master narrative and a counternarrative, how intersectionality contributes to

understanding oppression, as well as what is considered an effective counternarrative. I have also raised a key question: who can tell a counternarrative?

To begin with, it is helpful to consider some conditions from Solórzano and Yosso. They note that: “Personal stories or narratives recount an individual’s experiences with various forms of racism and sexism” (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002, p. 32). While they only name racism and sexism, the same logic applies to any form of marginalization. I agree that regardless of whether an eventual student counternarrative is fictional or not, starting off with personal experiences makes students situate themselves within oppressive systems. I have mentioned above that in my experience, students who identify themselves within marginalized communities find this project to be more accessible, and that in general, grounding stories in their own experience is not as much of a challenge. I imagine that this is because societal barriers are far more evident to them in their daily lives because of their identities, and so they are at least intuitively familiar with the concept of a Master narrative. For students who don’t readily identify with marginalized communities, I see two possible angles for them to approach the creation of a counternarrative. First, is there an area of life where they actually have experienced oppression, but are unaware of it? An example of this would be students who are marginalized in categories that are less socially discussed: Perhaps a student with an invisible disability hasn’t had the opportunity to explore how many social systems resist them, or perhaps a low-income student hasn’t had a chance to enunciate how many doors are open for their peers that aren’t open for them. Second, if there isn’t an area where students identify as being marginalized, can they explore their participation in oppressive systems? Perhaps a student can begin to notice how their understanding of the “natural” state of the world is actually charged with power, or perhaps they might explore how they have inadvertently or intentionally reinforced a harmful status quo in their life. In other words, it’s a process for students to begin to understand allyship. Regardless of the story they decide to pursue, there is rich meaning in starting with personal experiences and understandings.

While Solórzano and Yosso don't support the concept of entirely fictional counternarratives, they do allow space for stories that combine elements of fiction with reality. They note:

> Composite stories and narratives draw on various forms of "data" to recount the racialized, sexualized, and classed experiences of people of color. Such counter-stories may offer both biographical and autobiographical analyses because the authors create composite characters and place them in social, historical, and political situations to discuss racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of subordination. (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002, p. 33)

Again, extending the logic of this definition beyond scholarly research in Critical Race Theory, such a method could allow elements of fictionalization for a students' counternarrative, while continuing to ground the story in their individual reality and interaction with oppressive systems. I believe that here there is theoretically wiggle room for me to experiment with person stories, composite stories, and fiction in the classroom.

Once a counternarrative is planned, how can it best be created and shared? Returning to the concept of Nelson's "communities of choice," she elaborates:

> The boundaries may be blurred, but there is nevertheless a difference between the two sorts of communities that has important implications for the viability of a counterstory: a found community operates on a given set of shared moral understandings, while a chosen community can operate on quite another (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 10)

This quote highlights the importance of community in different forms as a means of nurturing a counternarrative. If a student is forced into a hostile environment within a "found community" that is outside of their control, it will be difficult for them to find the network and support to develop their individual ideas, since that community will operate on a "shared moral understanding" that may effectively deny their experiences. This has clear ramifications within a classroom: if a student is feeling isolated and unsupported by their peers in the class (and I think we can assume that most classes will have at least one student in this situation), I'll need to help them connect with an appropriate "chosen community" that can foster their idea for a counternarrative. Perhaps this means making

sure they consult friends, or clubs, or forums, or family members who they can share their experiences with before writing their counternarrative.

A challenging dimension I haven't explored, when creating a counternarrative, will also be to factor in how it will be distributed beyond just the student-teacher relationship. A counternarrative cannot work in a vacuum; not only does it need to interact with a Master narrative, ideally it needs to be considered by those who have not questioned that Master narrative in society. Lindemann Nelson notes:

> To be optimally successful, a counterstory must be culturally digestible and widely circulated, taken up not only by those who are on the receiving end of abusive power arrangements, but also by those who have benefited from those arrangements. People in the dominant group who have accepted the master narratives that identify subgroup members in morally degrading terms must be moved to endorse the counterstory even though they lose privileges, services, or cherished ways of thinking by doing so. (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p.151)

This quote highlights that effectively, a counternarrative asks some people to limit their privileges. While I agree with the concept that the ultimate goal of a counternarrative is to be accepted within the larger society, I foresee challenges in emphasizing that a story must be "culturally digestible." I fear that this risks students "watering down" or "tone policing" themselves to try to make their story more palatable. At times, obviously, an easily digestible counternarrative could benefit everyone, but I am concerned that being digestible means it contains some elements of harmful master narratives mixed in with counternarratives[6]. There must also be room for stories that challenge, and perhaps offend, and move the listener to reconsider the concept after time passes. Perhaps a student offers a counternarrative that other students find undigestible and offensive, but years later they look back on it as poignant - there is value in this retroactive analysis.

Lindemann Nelson's quote above also considers the need to distribute the story widely, which is an additional challenge within a classroom setting. While there are physical

[6] An example of this would be a common analysis from my students when analysing *Hamilton: An American Musical* as a counternarrative: while it may be considered a counternarrative in that elevates rap and actors of colour, it can also be interpreted as sexist, and forgiving of slave owners like George Washington.

ways to distribute stories, I have found that Critical Media Literacy offers some helpful considerations:

> This approach demands a Gramscian analysis of the hegemonic nature of digital media and the symbiotic forces of coercion and consensus that work to maintain the power of the capitalist state (Gramsci, 1980). Teachers and students must analyze not only the text itself, but also the roles of the creator, the audience, and the stakeholders with interest in this power relationship. (Mirra et. al., 2018, p. 14)

Mirra et. al. call for not only counternarratives, but to consider the distribution of a counternarrative as a key component of understanding power dynamics in society. Why are some stories distributed widely, and not others? How does confirmation bias intersect with oppressive forces to make it so that some stories stay Master narratives? They add: “A critical digital production involves conceptualizing radical counter-narratives and having the tools and the ability to create these counter-narratives by leveraging the most advanced digital technologies” (Mirra et. al., 2018, p. 14). This is an ambitious understanding of how to create counternarratives. I have spent a significant amount of time considering the identification and production of counternarratives, and adding distribution of counternarratives by including the oppressive potential of digital technologies adds a new dimension for me to understand and apply within the classroom.

To finish off this section, I offer Nelson’s thoughts around the stakes of why the production of a counternarrative matters. She notes three different goals for counternarratives:

> To *refuse* a master narrative is to deny that it applies to oneself and to tend one’s own counterstory, perhaps without serious effort or any hope that others will take it up. To *repudiate* a master narrative is to use the self-understanding arising from a counterstory to oppose others’ applying the narrative to oneself, but the opposition is piecemeal. To *contest* a master narrative is to oppose it with a counterstory both publicly and systematically. (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p.169)

The ultimate goal, I believe, is to aim for students to “contest” a master narrative, and to do so means considering every step of the process, from the initial idea grounded in a personal experience, to the ethical creation of the story, to its systematic distribution, and ultimately the adoption of the counternarrative within dominant groups of society.

Indeed, in some ways the ultimate goal is for a counternarrative to become a more just master narrative: “Optimally successful counterstories *must* be master narratives, since success consists precisely in the counterstory’s becoming widely circulated and socially shared” (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 157). This is a overwhelming goal, especially for a public school curriculum, and Lindemann Nelson offers some reassuring context when aiming to change an entire system: “If it manages to dilute the moral poison of the narrative, and so free the group members’ moral agency, then despite any constraints under which it operates, the story is good enough” (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 186). This will be helpful when working with teenagers: “good enough” will often be, well, good enough.

Why Teach Counternarratives?

I have thus far focused mostly on what a counternarrative is, and how it might be effectively produced and distributed. In this section, I shift my focus to explore several perspectives on why it’s beneficial to teach.

Richard Delgado offers several benefits of counternarratives. He notes that “Deliberately exposing oneself to counterstories can avoid that impoverishment, heighten ‘suspicion,’ and can enable the listener and teller to build a world richer than either could make alone” (Delgado, 1989, p. 2439). This appears to be a call for making stories more complex in the spirit of heightening “suspicion,” which I understand to be critical thinking skills. More inspiring is the idea of building a “richer” world: in many ways, a frustration I have with the widespread acceptance of Master narratives in society is that it represents a comfortable failure of imagination, and counternarratives can be vehicles for us to imagine a better future. He expands on this idea:

> It is through this process that we can overcome enthnocentrism and the unthinking conviction that our way of seeing the world is the only one - that the way things are is inevitable, natural, just, and best - when it is, for some, full of pain, exclusion, and both petty and major tyranny (Delgado, 1989, p. 2439)

In addition to calling for greater imagination, Delgado calls for counternarratives as an act of empathy, to see the suffering that others are silently (at least, to them) enduring. As a call to members of dominant groups to seek out counternarratives, he notes: “Listening to the stories of outgroups can avoid intellectual apartheid” (Delgado, 1989, p. 2440). This is a practical plea: to ignore counternarratives is to limit your understanding of the world.

There are also calls for counternarrative as a means of unifying marginalized communities. Solórzano and Yosso note: “when the ideology of racism is examined and racist injuries are named, victims of racism can find their voice. Furthermore, those injured by racism and other forms of oppression discover they are not alone in their marginality” (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002, p. 27). Connecting like-minded marginalized students is a strong motivation to continue teaching this concept. Crenshaw adds:

> It is enough, for now, that such an effort would encourage us to look beneath the prevailing conceptions of discrimination and to challenge the complacency that accompanies belief in the effectiveness of this framework. By so doing, we may develop language which is critical of the dominant view and which provides some basis for unifying activity. (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 167)

In addition to connecting students in marginalized communities, counternarratives might help develop much needed linguistic growth, effectively labelling the otherwise nebulous terms of their oppression, as well as supporting self-identity and self-awareness. Since Master narratives intentionally encourage everyone to accept them without critique, it is often difficult to find the right words to resist them. One of the great pleasures of teaching is seeing students learn that there is a word for a specific feeling or idea they’ve experienced without being able to label it beforehand, especially if they’re able to connect with each other about the idea.

Even without labelling them counternarratives, I would also argue that they can enable Paulo Freire’s concept of *conscientization*:

> Reflection upon situationality is reflection about the very condition of existence: critical thinking by means of which people discover each other to be "in a situation." Only as this situation ceases to present itself as a dense, enveloping reality or a tormenting blind alley, and they can come to perceive it as an objective-problematic situation—only then can commitment exist. Humankind emerge from their submersion and acquire the ability to intervene in reality as it is unveiled. Intervention in reality—historical awareness itself—thus represents a step forward from emergence, and results from the *conscientização* of the situation. *Conscientização* is the deepening of the attitude of awareness characteristic of all emergence. (Freire, 1968, p.109)

My hope would be that by exposing students to the concept of counternarratives, it would encourage “reflection about the very condition of existence,” and that the process of creating their own story could be an “intervention in reality.” Perhaps a key draw of this project for me is because it encourages the messy process of critical consciousness: it is a prism through which they might see the oppression of the world, and work to stop it. Put another way: “To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming. Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection” (Freire, 1968, p. 88). Counternarratives might be one effective way for students to pronounce, and change, their world.[7]

Finally, it is worth connecting counternarratives to the curriculum that guides my practice. While I was inspired by the New Media 10 course to explore this topic because of exposure to Critical Media Literacy, I now see that counternarratives can apply to all grade levels and curricular goals. The curriculum does not specify the words counternarrative or Master narrative, however, one of the Big Ideas that is represented (with some wording difference) through each grade in the current British Columbia provincial curriculum supports the teaching of the concept: “The exploration of text and story deepens our understanding of diverse, complex ideas about identity, others, and the world” (British Columbia, 2018). The

[7] I would be remise here not to include a critique, from a decolonial perspective, of Freire’s concepts: “we understand the curricular- pedagogical project of critical consciousness as *settler harm reduction,* crucial in the resuscitation of practices and intellectual life outside of settler ontologies. (Settler) harm reduction is intended only as a stopgap” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 21). Critical consciousness is good, but should lead to, among other things, a more thorough understanding and application of Indigenous philosophies.

language of this Big Idea is similar all the way down to English 8: “Exploring stories and other texts helps us understand ourselves and make connections to others and to the world” (British Columbia, 2018). It is difficult for me to imagine a more thorough way for students to connect to their world than by exploring counternarratives. At any level, exploring counternarratives would more than meet the requirements of this Big Idea at each grade.

To summarize this section, there are many benefits to teaching counternarratives. They encourage those in dominant society to better understand their privileged place in the world; they allow marginalized communities to speak back to oppression, connect and understand each other; they encourage critical consciousness; and they have clear connections to the BC Curriculum. Now that I have explored multiple theoretical angles to better understand Master Narratives and counternarratives, I will next analyse scholarly research on concrete examples to examine how these ideas are put into practice.

Who has done this? Exploring Scholarly Examples of Counternarratives

Conducting research for the use of examples of counternarratives in scholarly literature yielded a wide array of results. While there are many articles that have focused on counternarratives, as well as many examples that analysed what I thought were counternarratives without naming them, I decided to focus on three of them, as a means of better understanding my own practice. Ultimately, they enriched my understanding of Master narratives and counternarratives, highlighted areas for further growth for me, and confirmed that counternarratives are powerful anti-oppressive prisms to use in my role as a secondary teacher.

Overall, there seems to be widespread agreement that counternarratives and master narratives are useful practices to engage with, especially within the field of Critical Race

Theory. I found several examples of research about using counternarratives created by educators, and many examples of scholarly research analysing examples of youths creating counternarratives outside of the school system. However, I found what may be a gap in the research, when it comes to analysing the work of youth-made counternarratives within school systems. Considering an important component of my research was discovering how all the students in my class might engage in counternarratives, it was disappointing to not find more examples of other teachers doing similar work. However, I am aware that it is likely that many teachers are actually doing this work, but are perhaps not naming them counternarratives, or are not involved in research projects; therefore a key goal I have moving forward is to continue to try to find others doing this classroom work, and to continue to seek out research on the topic.

My analysis starts, fittingly enough, with one of the first scholarly journals I found when I started research years ago: "'Just Like I Have Felt': Multimodal Counternarratives in Youth-Produced Digital Media" by Jen Scott Curwood and Damiana Gibbons. I relied on this article when I first started teaching counternarratives, and because the authors base their theory on Lindemann Nelson's work, I too started with that philosophical background. Beyond the sentimentality of using Curwood and Gibbon's work, I also found this article to be the most useful: the article is based on the use of a counternarrative in a literature class in a high school setting. While this is the most applicable study I found, there are limitations to its usefulness to me: the authors were more interested in the multimodality of the counternarrative than I am, and the purpose of the classroom assignment they analysed differs from my own approach.

Curwood and Gibbons are interested in how multimodality interacts with counternarratives. They note that "while digital tools enable students to readily make films and podcasts, for instance, educators must remain attuned to the ways in which these tools allow students to express their identities, reflect on their lives, and share their stories with an audience" (Curwood & Gibbons, 2010, p. 60). This resonates with my work, in that while I'm sympathetic to the importance of embracing new "digital tools," especially in the context of a

New Media course, I am wary that I might overemphasize these tools over the main goal, which is to have students learn to identify who they are and assert their identity in a sometimes hostile world. Ultimately, Curwood and Gibbons' goal is to

> perform a *multimodal micro-analysis* of a digital poem created by a high school sophomore, Tommy Nouansacksy (real name used with permission). We use this tool to better understand Tommy's modal choices and how these, in turn, function to resist master narratives prevalent in his community around race and sexual orientation. (Curwood & Gibbons, 2010, p. 60).

Their article revolves around a deep dive into a single counternarrative created by a single marginalized student, going frame by frame through the digital poem. This approach has some obvious limitations: by thoroughly analysing one specific poem, I am unaware of work created by others in that students' community, and I also don't know how the counternarrative was received in a larger audience.

Despite the limitations, I found that much of their findings aligned with issues that I have faced in my work. They offer some helpful thoughts at the challenge facing public school teachers:

> Within the realm of education, we must question the responsibility of the classroom teacher in creating space for counternarratives… Given the space, the tools, and the audience, how can young people create counternarratives? Youth-produced counternarratives do not operate within a vacuum, separate from the social, cultural, and discursive spaces within schools. Therefore, in order to understand how youth can resist master narratives through their digital media productions, we must closely study what young people are creating and what their intended message is for their audience. (Curwood & Gibbons, 2010, p. 62)

I appreciate the emphasis on the delicacy of a project like this in the public space, and agree with their assessment, that counternarratives created by youth require close attention to detail. Personally, I have found that assessing these projects takes considerably longer, because the content is sensitive and nuanced, and the formats often challenge the typical assignments I often receive from students. Similarly, Curwood and Gibbons focus on the sensitivity of my role as a teacher:

> If teachers themselves—consciously or unconsciously— wield such power and attempt to perpetuate master narratives, they will likely resist the creation of space for students to tell their stories and talk back against such oppression. On the other hand, by allowing counternarratives to enter the classroom and be

> produced by students, teachers can actively resist cultural imperialism. (Curwood & Gibbons, 2010, p. 62)

Especially when I consider my positionality as a white, male, able-bodied teacher, it is at times tempting to ignore counternarratives, because it is difficult to create a space where students can "talk back against such oppression." It is very easy for someone in my position to perpetuate Master narratives, and so I must approach my own role in this project with care. It is also gratifying to see the teacher in this study struggling with some of the same concepts that I have also struggled with:

> She knew that some students were very conscious of the ways in which master narratives impacted their lives—and that these same students were often the ones who existed outside those narratives and who experienced discrimination—while others simply could not recognize (let alone respond to) them. (Curwood & Gibbons, 2010, p. 64)

This echoes some of my earlier findings that because Master narratives are unseen by so many, there are significant differences in the way students can intuitively already see hierarchies in stories. The teacher, in the example, is similarly identifying the difficult question of how to have *all* students engage with Master narratives.

What I gained from considering this article is to juxtapose a practical example of a high school student creating a single counternarrative, with my own goals of expanding this into a class-wide project. It is the matter of choice: the student in the study *chose* to make a counternarrative, as opposed to an entire classroom of students being *mandated* to create counternarratives (Curwood & Gibbons, 2010, p. 64). The article's conclusion points towards the rich potential of counternarratives in the classroom: "We argue that Tommy's digital poem is an attempt at beginning or continuing a negotiation of identity…We posit that this has clear implications for educators as they work to integrate new literacy practices and allow space for identity expression within schools" (Curwood & Gibbons, 2010, p. 60). In this case, I am that educator, working to "integrate new literacy practices and allow space for identity expression." The gap here, between what Curwood and Gibbons considered and what I'm considering, is a matter of scale and multiple perspectives within my own

classroom. It is helpful to note that the article also hints that this is an area for further exploration in the field of education:

> Digital media production can be a way for youth to explore the master narratives around them, to push back against them, and to tell stories of their lives in an effort to (re)present their identities. But before that can happen, teachers need to turn inward and look at how their own experiences are reflected in their pedagogy. Understanding how youth create counternarratives in school spaces through the use of digital media is the first step in this direction. (Curwood & Gibbons, 2010, p. 64)

This article was useful in glimpsing a similar use of my own counternarrative project in the classroom, and it was gratifying to see the researchers come to similar conclusions as I have. The article continues to leave me with questions, especially regarding how every student in a class might benefit from a focus on counternarratives. A key learning I took away from this article is that this remains an under-researched topic, which is both daunting (it's helpful to see the work that more experienced teachers are doing) and exciting (it gives me liberty to experiment with the concept while continuing to look for more real-life examples of teachers teaching counternarratives).

The second article I focus on explores counternarratives created by Indigenous youth, outside of the school system: "Storytelling as engagement: Learning from youth voices in Attawapiskat" by Sarah Marie Wiebe. While this article doesn't contribute to my questions around counternarratives as a classroom practice, I chose it because of its relevant focus on youth-led counternarratives. Additionally, its focus on an Indigenous community grounds is, to me, what is at stake in better understanding the role of Master narratives: especially as a teacher in Canada, where there is increasing emphasis on Reconciliation, it is important to acknowledge and center the role of Indigenous counternarrative production. The study examines youth-created videos, made in response to a widely broadcasted perception within the Canadian media landscape about suicides in the Attawapiskat community. A particularly poignant angle that the article encouraged me to consider is the role of "crisis" in Master narratives; many identities are stereotyped and flattened (this draws to mind other narrative "crises," like the homeless population in the

Downtown Eastside) by the perception that they are in an emergency and require benevolent outside help. Wiebe points out: “As political theorist Bonnie Honig highlights, the context of emergency politics reveals the need for an important intervention into the conversation about democratic theory and practice” (Wiebe, 2020, p. 316). I have often encouraged students to consider the complexity of identity in marginalized groups, only to have the conversation turn into a sad discussion about a crisis. Not only does this angle add a deeper understanding of the way that Master narratives can permeate social understanding, it draws attention to the role of democratic theory and practice in countering that understanding. This adds complexity to the idea of a counternarrative: if done properly, it might be considered an effective democratic act, which could help counter Master narratives of perpetual crisis.

In her article, the challenge goes beyond just identifying Master narratives created by mass media that flatten the identity of Attawapiskat. Wiebe argues “that creative and collaborative mixed media storytelling methodologies with Indigenous youth have the potential to interrupt the predominant crisis narrative that frames Attawapiskat as vulnerable and in need of intervention and protection from external experts” (Wiebe, 2020, p. 313). One aspect about this project which I was grateful to read was that in removing the context of counternarratives in the classroom, the practice felt, to me, far more important: it is not a purely theoretical idea to create a counternarrative, but rather an act of resistance to a harmful colonial power. Additionally, by focusing on counternarratives outside of the classroom, it centres Indigenous perspectives on place:

> While this coverage raised awareness about the slow-moving violence and systemic oppression confronting Indigenous peoples in Canada, it also overlooked the community’s strengths, including long-standing connections that many Attawapiskat citizens have to the lands and waters that make up their home. (Wiebe, 2020, p. 314)

In this sense, the counternarratives are created by youth on their own terms, in an environment that is not confined by a physical classroom. When I consider the ways in which the lessons I have taught on counternarratives have been constrained by my actual classroom, there are limited avenues for students to consider their environment

as part of an identity to explore in a counternarrative. In this sense, the article enriches my understanding of what a counternarrative can be: it can explore the messy, true connection between a young person's identity and their sense of home.

Wiebe's article is less focused on explicitly defining counternarratives, but nonetheless explores the role that story can play in countering the harmful status quo: "This lens thus focuses on the power relations between hegemonic and subjugated discourses, which are produced by sanctioning processes such as the circulation and valuing of certain concepts, ideas, and words" (Wiebe, 2020, p. 317). This, to me, speaks to the universal appeal of counternarratives: everyone can eventually learn to grasp "hegemonic and subjugated discourses," and creating a video to assert your identity is now far more accessible. Though the emphasis on youth is outside of the classroom, the article provides a helpful understanding as to why teaching young people about counternarratives is so important: "There is increasing agreement that youth themselves are in the best position to identify the root causes of feelings of hopelessness and to develop strategies to respond to these emergent mental health concerns" (Wiebe, 2020, p. 323). I feel that there is justification, here, for teaching the concept of counternarratives to prepare students to create them outside of the classroom. Additionally, if counternarratives need to be created in a spirit of hopefulness, it is because they stake a claim in a better future. There is an understanding here that young people are or will be better suited to not only critique unfairness in their systems, but also will be the ones who need to imagine a better world. This article, I felt, grounded the theoretical importance of counternarratives in real-life examples of resisting a harmful status quo.

The third and final article I examine shifts the focus from students creating counternarratives to teachers creating counternarratives: "Counternarratives as DisCrit Praxis: Disrupting Classroom Master Narratives Through Imagined Composite Stories," by Mallory A. Locke, Valerie Guzman, Armineh E Hallaran, Migdalia Arciegas, Tanya E. Friedman, and Adela Brito. I found several examples of scholars basing their work in Critical

Race Theory to conduct research by asking marginalized educators to create composite counternarratives. In this case, the authors of the article co-created composite counternarratives, with “three white practitioner-scholars and three activist teachers of colour” (Locke et. al., 2022, p. 150). What is striking to me about this practice is that it brings the positionality of the teacher, and thus my own positionality, into greater focus. They point out that their “cogenerated composite stories interrogate the master narratives that perpetuate inequitable school spaces, such as the centering of whiteness in curriculum, teachers as gatekeepers, and the narrowing of knowledge (Johnson, 2018)” (Locke et. al., 2022, p. 157). The article doesn’t consider the practical questions I have around how best to teach counternarratives in a classroom setting, but by encouraging me to consider how I might similarly build connections and counternarratives with other teachers, it reminds me that I too am often unaware of the water I’m swimming in. If I am to effectively teach counternarratives, and justify it through the curriculum, I need to continue to identify the ways in which I might be propping up Master narratives in my own “inequitable school spaces.”

This article is also beneficial in that it elaborates on the importance of intersectionality, and raises some compelling points which contribute to my understanding of applying counternarratives in the classroom. The authors “engaged counternarratives—most often employed as an outcome—as an act of methodological resistance” (Locke et. al., 2022, p. 154-155), by evaluating composite counternarratives made by teachers. They focus on Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit), which “illuminated the interdependence between racism and ableism and forged new intersectional theory by specifically speaking to oppressive forces that disproportionately affect students with multiply-marginalized identities (Crenshaw, 1989)” (Locke et. al., 2022, p. 151). I found this to be particularly useful when considering how to apply the lens of intersectionality in my own classes; a different teacher, who is perhaps “multiply-marginalized,” would have a significantly different experience teaching about counternarratives. Not only do I need to consider my own role as a white teacher, but as an able-bodied one as well. This article, then, shows in practice how by

centering intersectionality, it acknowledges the lived reality of many students within an oppressive system is acknowledged:

> we sought to identify specific master narratives that dominate authentic classroom spaces and to imagine counternarratives that were neither so tethered to existing structures that our imaginations were limited nor so untethered to the lived conditions of schooling that teachers would find them unrealistic rather than inspiring… As practitioner-scholars, the process of cogenerating the composite stories highlighted the capacity of theory to enliven instructional decision-making and deepen pedagogical reflection when considered in the context of real classroom questions, goals, and barriers. We experienced the utility of classroom composite stories as a professional learning tool for critically conscious praxis. (Locke et. al., 2022, p. 166-67)

Their use of counternarratives as a research methodology for creating teacher composite stories, while not directly applicable within my own goals for counternarratives, added a depth of understanding to the value of a counternarrative. Teachers are participants in classroom structures that often reinforce harmful social hierarchies, and by participating in creating counternarratives, teachers are reminded of our roles in shaping the experience of students.

The study's approach is grounded in Critical Race Theory, and their definition of counternarratives is similar to the ones that I have explored:

> Counternarratives 'represent non-mainstream stories which represent other truths, and other experiences that directly refute hegemony' (Milner & Howard, 2013, p. 542) and serve as a tool of Critical Race Theory that can privilege the stories and experiences of teachers of color serving multiply-marginalized students (Locke et. al., 2022, p. 154)

They approach counternarratives in a similar way as Solórzano and Yosso, by focusing on the role of composite characters and CRT. The article also highlighted a new area for me to better understand some of the frustration I have felt when trying to learn about scholarly understanding of counternarratives. In their study, the authors point to the "theory-practice gap" (Locke et. al., 2022, p. 155), and highlight:

> critically conscious teachers who seek to make DisCrit live in classroom spaces still need support and models to operationalize theory into practice. To facilitate enacting the constructs of DisCrit Classroom Ecology, scholarship must engage in dialogue with classroom teachers who have influence over the educational trajectories of multiply-marginalized students (Locke et. al., 2022, p. 155).

While this point is specifically about the practise of DisCrit theory, it speaks to the larger importance of research around counternarratives. The article elucidates a feeling I've long struggled to identify: there is a significant difference between what is theorized in academic settings and what is practiced in the classroom. In that sense, I feel a sense of freedom here to take more initiative outside of the boundaries of scholarly theory: it is good to ground my work in theory, and also recognize that I "still need support and models to operationalize theory into practice" (Locke et. al., 2022, p. 155). Including all the theories I've mentioned above are useful, and also I'll make many, many mistakes along the way. I have a duty to continue to seek support, both from other practitioners, as well as ongoing research.

To summarize this section: I considered how three separate articles approached the practice of counternarratives. First, Curwood and Gibbons (2010) analyse a student's counternarrative within a classroom setting, and confirmed for me many of the experiences and theoretical challenges that I have faced when teaching counternarratives: they are a messy, useful practice for students to explore their own identities. Despite this, the article also highlighted to me that research on counternarratives in the classroom is relatively limited. Second, Wiebe (2020) analyses Indigenous youth counternarratives outside of the classroom, and offers me a deeper understanding of how perceptions of crises can reinforce Master narratives. It also highlighted that counternarratives can be made richer when youths are able to connect their identity to place, especially within the context of Indigenous philosophies. Finally, Locke et. al. (2022) analyse composite counternarratives co-created by white and marginalized educators. Their research highlights the importance of a teacher's positionality, especially when considering the power they have in applying a curriculum grounded in oppressive forces. It also suggests the importance of teachers connecting with teacher-activists and creating counternarratives, to constantly resist the Master narratives that educators can easily reinforce in their own classrooms.

In the case of all three studies, I found that while many of my findings from earlier in the paper were confirmed, they also showed me unexamined richness in counternarratives,

and pointed me towards new areas to consider, as I move forward with this practice in my own classroom.

Conclusion

I began my English teaching career mostly because I loved stories. I thought it was a wonderful idea, that I could get paid to read and talk about stories all day long. The further along in my career I get, the more I find that I don't actually understand stories as much as I thought I did. Stories are everywhere, and they're shot through with power. As Lindemann Nelson astutely observes: "While I possess the ability to construct a representation of my past, I am only occasionally its narrator, though I am, of course, the protagonist and consistently the focalizer of the story" (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 75). We are all the hero of our own story, but not always the narrator, and it takes a considerable amount of effort to challenge that self-centred perception, to see the narrators telling our stories, and to maintain that awareness. I hope that developing counternarratives as a teacher is one prism through which I can grow understanding of our place in the world.

Counternarratives have opened a door for me, and I've only begun to step through that door. I had hoped, by focusing my research throughout my Master's on the theory and practice of counternarratives, that I might return to teaching counternarratives far more confident in guiding all of my students through their identification, creation, and distribution. While I feel better supported by a more robust understanding of theory, and am intrigued by the practices of other teachers, I am also left with a sense that fewer people are doing this work than I thought. Or, put another way: there is no clear roadmap for teaching counternarratives. That being said, this research has also confirmed for me that counternarratives are robust and useful, and worthy of expanding into more areas of my practice. I want to learn more about the theory, to see more specific research done on classroom counternarratives, and to continue to connect with others who are doing similar,

valuable anti-oppressive work. Counternarratives are a hopeful act, and as I enter the next stage of my anti-oppressive praxis, I am eager to centre hope.

Counternarratives in the Classroom: A How To Guide

My dear colleagues,

The purpose of this document is to offer some initial steps, introducing the practice of counternarratives in the classroom. Counternarratives are useful tools for any teacher interested in anti-oppressive practice. I first used them in my seventh year as an English Literature teacher, and the results presented me with enough questions that I dedicated my Master's degree to better understanding their theory and practice. This document is a brief summary of the work I completed for my Master's capstone project. After offering some key terminology, I'll walk through an example of the beginning of a unit plan - feel free to use any resource that I developed here.

Key Terminology

- Master narratives
    - To begin, a counternarrative must counter a Master narrative, which are stories that partly serve to reinforce harmful social structures. Here is the definition I offer students:
        - [They are the] stories found lying about in our culture that serve as summaries of socially shared understandings. Master narratives are often archetypal, consisting of stock plots and readily recognizable character types, and we use them not only to make sense of our experience (Nisbett and Ross 1980) but also to justify what we do (MacIntyre 1984). As the repositories of common norms, master narratives exercise a certain authority over our moral imaginations and play a role in informing our moral intuitions. Our culture's foundation myths - the Passion of the Christ, for example, or Washington Crossing the Delaware - are master narratives. So are the best-known fairy tales, landmark court cases, canonical works of great literature, movie classics. (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 6-7)
    - The challenge with Master narratives is in identifying them. Some stories are told so often and with so little resistance that we don't think of questioning

them (within a Canadian context, this could look like the Master narratives of Canada is a kind, progressive, peacekeeping, multicultural nation). The danger of Master narratives is that they can flatten or stereotype certain groups of people, while allowing members of the more dominant society to have more complex identities. They also present the status quo of society as normal, and in many ways are meant to reassure large parts of society that everything is alright.

- Counternarratives
    - Once you've identified a Master narrative, the trick is in developing a story that resists that narrative. Some quotes to help us understand them better:
        - They are "a story that resists an oppressive identity and attempts to replace it with one that commands respect" (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 6)
        - They "are purposive acts of moral definition, developed on one's own behalf or on behalf of others" (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. Xiii)
        - "Counterstories redefine a past that has been, until now, characterized incorrectly. They take a story that has (for the moment at least) been determined, undo it, and reconfigure it with a new significance" (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 18)
    - Counternarratives are difficult to create, because students must situate their identity against what a Master narrative might be saying about them. Then, they have to create a story that reflects the truth of their understanding of the world, and seeks to correct the Master Narrative's flaws.
    - There are debates in scholarly literature about how to best create counternarratives. For the purposes of my own classrooms, any student can create an autobiographical or fictional counternarrative, but their story should begin from a place of truth about themselves. In other words, creating a

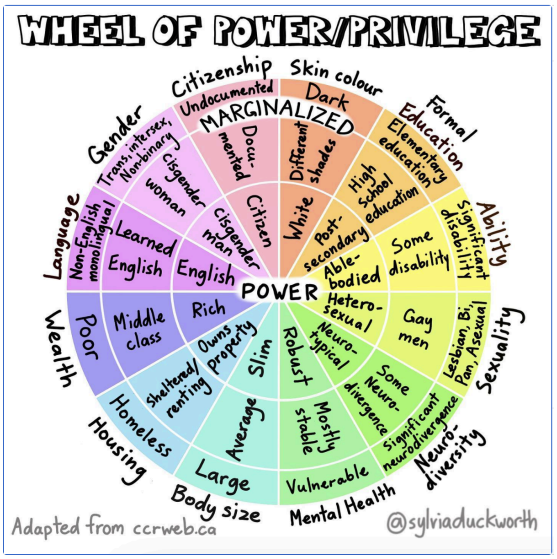
counternarrative on behalf of another group of people isn't advised, without significant reflection.

- Positionality
    - Every classroom will have different dynamics because of positionality, which "refers to how differences in social position and power shape identities and access in society." (University of British Columbia). This means that every time you teach about counternarratives, you'll need to consider your own positionality and the positionality of the students.
    - Another way to consider this is through different categories of identity, and the levels of privilege that come with them. These can include: race, gender, sexuality, ability, class, and many more.
- Intersectionality
    - This term has gained popular recognition in recent years, thanks to the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw. Her research centred on how Black women were often doubly discriminated against because of their "intersecting" identities as being Black and being women. One of her central ideas:
        - "Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140).
    - Since then, intersectionality has grown to explore all the different ways that marginalized people's identities can intersect. In 2016 she offered clarity by reminding people that intersectionality is not about solidifying identities into categories:
        - "Intersectionality is not primarily about identity. It's about how structures make certain identities the consequence of and the vehicle for vulnerability" (Crenshaw, 2016).

Example Unit Plan

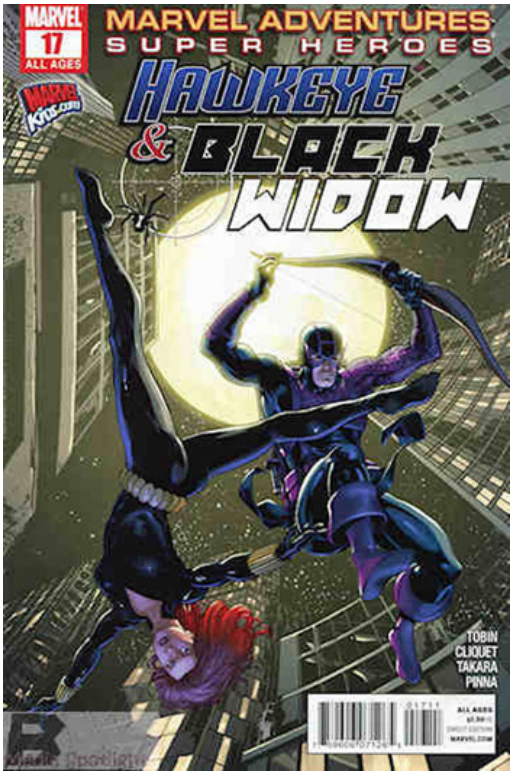
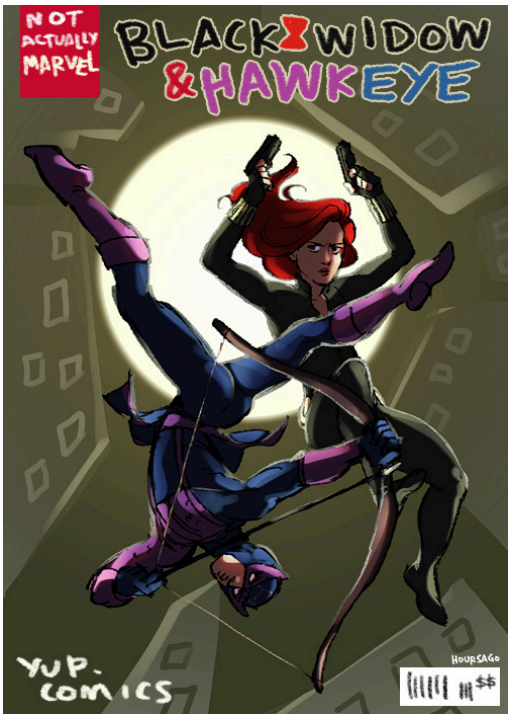
Lesson 1 “Introducing a Text through Counternarratives”	● Consider teaching a longer text, like a novel, through the lens of a counternarrative. This is best if the text you’ll be reading together as a class can at least be partially considered a counternarrative. ● I like to teach *Hamilton: An American Musical* and I’ll start and finish the unit with this question: Should this play be considered a counternarrative? This is a question I’ll return to a few times throughout the unit, as we examine power structures in the text. ● Introduce an assignment related to counternarratives. Here is the distillation of an assignment I often ask them to do: ○ Create your own counternarrative, which can be: ■ Your own story, countering a common Master narrative in society. Or ■ A retelling of a popular story, which perpetuates at least one Master narrative. ○ Offer a final reflection: Is *Hamilton* an effective counternarrative? Explain. ● Finally, I’ll ground the discussion in the curriculum. For British Columbia’s English curriculum, every grade has some version of this Big Idea: “The exploration of text and story deepens our understanding of diverse, complex ideas about identity, others, and the world” (British Columbia, 2018). I believe that conducting a unit on counternarratives thoroughly addresses this idea.
Lesson 2 “What is a Master Narrative?”	● Before diving into the text (and perhaps to give them some time to start reading/listening to it), I’ll spend a class exploring Master narratives. ● I begin by offering the definition of Lindemann Nelson above. Then I’ll ask: ○ What are some Master narratives that you know? ○ Are Master narratives harmful? Helpful? What are their purposes? ● I’ll then put the poster up for a popular movie, and ask: what Master narratives do you see here? Here’s an example for the film *Endgame*:

	○  ○ (Marvel Studios, 2019) ● I'll then finish off the class with the TED Talk: "The Danger of a Single Story" by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (18 minutes long). While she doesn't name them Master narratives, a Single Story is similar, and it's a very accessible video for young people to engage with. ● I finish off the lesson by asking them to brainstorm: what Master narrative might your counternarrative counter?
Lesson 3 "How to make a counternarrative?"	● As I start teaching the text itself (all teachers have different ways of doing that, which is beyond the scope of this document), I raise the question: How can we create counternarratives? ● I start by offering Lindemann Nelson's definition: it is "a story that resists an oppressive identity and attempts to replace it with one that commands respect" (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 6) ● I point out that to do this properly, we need to talk about personal identity. I'll then show them this chart, and ask them: Is this accurate? What might be missing?



- (Duckworth, 2020)
- It is important to stress two points here:
  - The purpose of the chart is not to declare this an accurate depiction of society, but rather to give them a "jumping off" position to talk about different points of identity.
  - If they're not sure how to engage with a Master narrative for their project, they might consider where they see themselves on this chart, and where they might want to offer resistance.
  - The chart also doesn't capture the compounding effect of intersectionality, which is worth exploring during this lesson or another.

- After reminding them of the *Endgame* poster above, I'll show them an example of what I consider a counternarrative:

	○  ○  ○ (needless procedures, 2012) ○ We'll spend some time analysing these images. I'll ask: ■ How does the first image reinforce Master narratives? ■ In what way is the second image a counternarrative? ■ Is this an effective counternarrative? Why? ■ In what ways does the second image still

	reinforce some Master narratives? ● I'll finish off with an additional TED Talk, which offers a counternarrative around ableism: Stella Young's "I am not your inspiration, thank you very much" (9 minutes). It's useful to highlight not only how ableism is a Master narrative, but also the danger of speaking for a group in a way that can cause them more harm than good. ● Finally, I'll ask them to return to the brainstorm from the day before: ○ Consider the Master narrative you identified. Now that you have a fuller understanding of counternarratives, what story might you tell to resist that narrative?
Lesson 4 and onwards "Examining the text for Master narratives and counternarratives"	● From here on out, the task is to analyse the text you're reading as both a Master narrative and a counternarrative. ● One effective strategy I have used is to present the ideas on a spectrum, and periodically ask students to pinpoint where they would place the text. Something like this: Master Narrative ----------Counter Narrative ● While that analysis is ongoing, help them develop their own counternarratives.

Thanks for taking the time to consider counternarratives in the classroom! They're tricky and valuable, and there are a lot of potentially uncomfortable pitfalls for teachers and students alike. It's difficult to talk about power and identity. That being said, we cannot stop isms (racism, ableism, sexism, etc) unless we talk about them. Counternarratives put important discussions front and center, and force everyone to examine their own role in society, through the stories we tell. If you're interested in learning more, feel free to read the paper I wrote: sections 3-6 are especially relevant, and explore the logistical and philosophical complexities of a project like this.

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