Developing Understandings of Race: Preservice Teachers’ Counter-Narrative (Re)Constructions of People of Color in Young Adult Literature

Wendy J. Glenn

This qualitative study reveals the ways in which reading and reflecting on two counter-narrative young adult novels fostered opportunities for preservice English teachers to think more acutely about their understandings of race within and beyond the text. Participants expressed feelings of empathy with and connection to characters whose cultural realities are different from their own. This emphasis on the universal human condition and transcendent power of literature suggests the potential of counter-narrative literature to allow participants to connect with characters across lines of difference. In addition, participants provided evidence of how the counter-narratives encouraged them to reconsider assumptions that society and they hold and perpetuate relative to people of color. The texts offered readers a new way in which to reconceptualize societal norms to reconsider how they see the seeming “other” and, in some cases, recognize their own culpability in promoting existing stereotypes. Finally, the counter-narrative texts heightened participants’ awareness of Whiteness, the ways in which race can privilege or limit by fostering insider or outsider status, and the discomfort that can result when such dichotomies define our identities. Findings illuminate the complexities inherent in the development of understandings of race among preservice teachers and reveal a richer understanding of preservice teachers’ development of knowledge related to the educational needs of students of color and their attitudes toward these students in and out of the classroom.

Changing demographics are transforming the fabric of the American classroom. Projections indicate that, by 2019, approximately 49 percent of students enrolled in U.S. public elementary and secondary schools will be Latino/Latina, African American and/or Black, Asian/Pacific Island, or American Indian (Hussar & Bailey, 2011). Conversely, nearly 85 percent of all secondary teachers are white, monolingual native English speakers, many of whom have had very little, if any, training in working with cultur-
ally and linguistically diverse learners, benefit from white privilege, and hold deficit-oriented beliefs toward young people of color\textsuperscript{1} (Aud et al., 2010; Cummins & Miramontes, 2006; Darling-Hammond, Chung, & Frelow, 2002; Fuentes, Chanthongthip, & Bios, 2010; Garcia & Guerra, 2005; Gomez, Black, & Allen, 2007; Menken & Antunez, 2001; NCES, 2002; Sleeter, 2008; Vavrus, 2002; Zeichner, 2005). Given preservice teachers’ often limited experiences with people of color in conjunction with the above noted demographic projections, it is critical that teachers in training have opportunities to build complex understandings of race.\textsuperscript{2}

The consideration of literary counter-narratives in the university setting has the potential to support preservice teachers as they engage in the struggle to develop richer understandings of race. Counter-narration embodies a method of telling the stories of those whose voices have been historically silenced and analyzing and challenging the stories of those who are in power to explore alternative ways of knowing and understanding (Delgado, 2000). Reflection on counter-narratives told by people of color can provide space and time for readers to disrupt or interrupt the existing discourses that serve to marginalize communities and people of color in their negative, deficit-oriented portrayals (Lopez, 2003). The counter-narrative can be used as an analytic tool to counter dominant (and sometimes debilitating) perspectives (Milner, 2008).

To examine the possibilities that counter-narratives might offer in the training of teachers to be more racially aware and informed, preservice teachers in a secondary English methods course taken as part of a teacher preparation program engaged with examples of counter-narratives in young adult literature to examine how engagement with these texts might encourage them to think more acutely about their existing constructions of race and assumptions surrounding people of color. The resulting research question follows: What effects did active engagement with examples of counter-narratives in young adult literature have on preservice teachers’ understandings of race?

**Related Literature**

In response to the demographic landscape described above, scholars have recognized the need to reform teacher preparation with a more explicit eye toward coursework and experiences that better prepare white teachers to engage with issues of race in the attempt to become more culturally responsive educators. Teacher educators have infused the tenets of anti-oppression education—educating teachers to critique power structures and...
why and how they exist, create classrooms that address inequity explicitly, and understand that teaching and learning are social practices mediated by language and shifting social and historical contexts (Kelly & Brooks, 2009, pp. 203–204)—into their programs and described the resulting effects on preservice teachers. Kelly and Brooks (2009), for example, examined how preservice elementary education candidates made sense of what it means to teach for social justice by exploring the assumptions that these beginning teachers held about young children’s cognitive and emotional capacities and demonstrating how these assumptions “bear centrally on how teachers might translate teaching for social justice into classroom practice” (p. 203).

Lazar (2004) followed a group of preservice teachers into a culturally responsive field placement and described how the experiences of these teachers prepared them for the responsibility that comes with teaching in urban settings. Similarly, Lazar’s 2007 study explored preservice teachers’ attitudes toward children and teaching in an urban high-poverty community in response to their experiences in one of two literacy courses, one that addressed explicitly issues of cultural diversity with respect to this community and one that did not. Findings suggest that the diversity-oriented literacy experience yielded positive effects on participants’ confidence and interest in teaching children in the urban community and supported their development of an enriched understanding of the children’s culture and home language.

Seidl (2007), in a collaborative project with master’s students in her program, engaged in a yearlong, cooperative inquiry designed to describe how prospective teachers explore, understand, and personalize cultural and political knowledge as they begin to develop culturally relevant approaches. Her work reveals how a group of preservice teachers, through participating and learning in a particular African American community, increased their bicultural competency and personalized cultural and political knowledge as they attempted to develop understanding and success in implementing culturally relevant pedagogies.

Laughter (2010) described the effects of participation in a dialogue circle around issues of race and racism in the university classroom on white preservice teachers. Through the analysis of racial development biographies written and shared by participants, Laughter and his students examined how students’ experiences and identities mapped and failed to map onto generalizations of white preservice teachers found in the research literature. In the recognition of multiple disconnects, participants came to better understand their own racialized identities and how each student in the dialogue community embodied and enacted Whiteness in different ways.
These studies have contributed to a strong body of work that explores how, through explicit study of race in the process of teacher preparation, preservice teachers can come to more fully and critically understand the communities from which their classroom students (and themselves) come, thus better preparing them to become what Murrell (2001) calls community teachers, those who “possess the contextualized knowledge of the culture, community, and identity of the children and families they serve and draw on this knowledge to create the core teaching practices necessary for effectiveness in diverse settings” (Murrell, p. 52, in Sleeter, 2008, p. 215). Community teachers are able “to interpret students’ classroom behavior in culturally accurate ways, understand aspirations the community has for its children and youth, and learn about knowledge traditions in communities in which they work” (Sleeter, 2008, p. 215).

In related studies, multicultural literature has been identified as a potential tool for helping preservice teachers engage with and gain richer understanding of these knowledge traditions (Gere, Buehler, Dallavis, & Haviland, 2009; Lazar & Offenberg, 2011; Mosley, 2010). Reading and reflection on multicultural literature can provide opportunities for white teacher candidates to critically examine assumptions of self and other relative to racial, cultural, and linguistic identities. The distance between fiction and reality reduces the risks often associated with conversations around race in the classroom (Glenn, 2006; Glenn, Ginsberg, Gaffey, Lund, & Meagher, 2012; Glenn, King, Heintz, Berg, & Klapatch, 2009; Williams, 2004) and affords preservice teachers space in which to respond to racism and its dominant ideology by calling into question normative depictions of everyday living that ignore or discount structural barriers to equality faced by people of color (Brooks, 2006, 2009). Through text, “teachers and students can gather to reflect on their understandings and responses, to consider alternatives, and to collaborate in extending their world views” (Simon & Norton, 2011, p. 294; Laman, 2006; Short, 2009). The texts themselves might illustrate how injustice, marginalization, and power affect individuals and communities and inspire consideration of complex questions (Burns, 2009; Ching, 2005; Short, 2009; Simon & Norton, 2011). In response, readers can read the text and world critically, recognize the limitations of depending on outsider and mainstream depictions of people and their experiences, build background knowledge, and expand their worldview (Burns, 2009; Ching, 2005; Christensen, 2006; George, 2002; Laman, 2006; Santman, 2005; Short, 2009; Simon, 2010; Simon & Norton, 2011; Wolk, 2004).

329
This study builds upon existing work to focus on the counter-narrative potential of multicultural texts to help preservice teachers explicitly critique existing perceptions of communities and families. The use of counter-narrative titles with K–12 students in the school setting has shown promise in helping students of color find connection and meaning in their reading and supporting all students in the construction of sophisticated understandings of narratives that situate characters as participants in a highly racialized society (Brooks, 2006; Franzak, 2001; Moller & Allen, 2000; Sutherland, 2005). As evidenced by these studies, we have some understanding of how counter-narrative texts might be used to support K–12 students’ awareness and understanding of these communities; however, it seems that consideration of the teachers who bring these titles into the classroom is equally important. These teachers make choices as to the texts they teach and the ways in which they teach them. Given the fact that preservice teacher candidates bring personal perspectives on what race means, perspectives constructed primarily through their often-limited life experiences (Marx, 2004; Sleeter, 1993), attending to these perspectives to ensure culturally aware instruction for all students is imperative.

Most preservice teacher candidates across the United States (and all but one of those in this study) live in and are products of American society, are white, and have benefitted from the institutional and social structures that advance whites over others. Counter-narratives in young adult literature can not only expose preservice teachers to unfamiliar voices but also challenge existing constructions of race. Storytelling from the perspective of fictionalized characters of color provides powerful counter-stories that challenge the “majoritarian stories” that make white privilege appear natural (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). These stories, as constructed by the “other,” allow for a broader, or “liminal,” perspective that can reveal the ways in which “dominant perspectives distort the realities of the other in an effort to maintain power relations that continue to disadvantage those who are locked out of the mainstream” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, pp. 262–263). These counter-stories can affect the oppressor, catalyzing the “necessary cognitive conflict to jar White dysconscious racism” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 14). In learning to listen to other people’s counter-stories, readers can find ways to make them matter by honestly reflecting on their personal constructions of race and how these constructions influence their lives and the lives of others (Bernal, 2002).
To that end, this study focuses on the ways in which counter-narratives in young adult literature provide preservice teachers the opportunity to grapple with the voices and life circumstances of young people of color, thus allowing them a fictionalized means to explore potential realities. This distance between fiction and reality reduces the risks often associated with conversations around race in the classroom (Glenn, 2006; Williams, 2004) and affords preservice teachers a space in which to respond to racism and its dominant ideology by calling into question normative depictions of everyday living that ignore or discount structural barriers to equality faced by people of color (Brooks, 2009). Although a wide variety of fictional texts beyond the YA genre might prove effective in incorporating explicit study of race into teacher preparation, this study focuses on titles that, given the age of the protagonists, align with adolescent concerns, questions, and experiences that secondary English education candidates are most likely to find relevant to students in their future classrooms. Young adult texts, given their contemporary nature and adolescent protagonists, model more readily the potential realities of students with whom teachers might work in the classroom, thus helping bridge from fiction to considerations of life beyond the text.

Methods

Participants and Materials

Fourteen preservice English teachers enrolled in a teacher preparation program in the northeastern United States participated in the study. Of the 14 students, all were born and raised in the United States, 1 identifies as Black, 13 identify as white, 1 is male, 13 are female, and all identify as monolingual English speakers.

As part of their experience in their senior year English methods course, participants read and discussed two young adult novels that represent counter-narrative examples of youth of color through the ways in which they present characters and situations that call into question dominant paradigms of race.

Mexican WhiteBoy, by Matt de la Péna (2008): This novel centers on 16-year-old Danny Lopez, a biracial teen who feels lost in each of the two worlds he inhabits. Due to his parents’ divorce, he lives with his white mother in a suburb of San Diego and attends a private, predominantly white high school where he feels like an outsider due to the darker color of his skin. When he chooses to spend the summer with his Mexican father’s family in National City, however, he feels just as isolated, unaccustomed to the foods and smells that fill his grandmother’s home. A monolingual English
speaker, he expresses additional discomfort and distance in his inability to follow any conversations conducted in Spanish. Over the course of the summer, Danny struggles with what he perceives as his competing identities, ultimately finding solace and answers in baseball, unexpected friendship, and an increasingly honest relationship with his father.

*After Tupac and D Foster, by Jacqueline Woodson (2008)*: As the anonymous narrator of this tale and her best friend, Neeka, jump rope on the sidewalk at the end of the summer, D Foster meanders onto their block and forever changes their lives. The girls learn that D Foster lives a reality far removed from that which they’ve experienced in their Queens neighborhood. Although the narrator and Neeka face financial and familial challenges, they live with adults who seem to care, sometimes too much, they think, given the strict curfews and limited range the girls are afforded. In contrast, D Foster has experienced the repeated neglect and absence of a mother, a string of foster homes, and a freedom that the narrator and Neeka envy but that she would give up for the stable family life they enjoy. The girls share a passion for and interest in the music and events centered on the shooting of Tupac Shakur in 1994. The narrator, in particular, witnesses the ways in which Tupac’s words, reflective of maternal love and pain, seem to resonate with D Foster. The narrator recognizes that she will never fully understand D Foster and the kind of life she has experienced—and vice versa. “Everyone’s got a purpose,” reminds the narrator, “and it’s just that they gotta figure out what it is and then go have it” (Woodson, 2008, p. 5).

**Procedures**

Discussion of the counter-narrative began following a three-week introduction to culturally and linguistically responsive teaching at the outset of the methods course (drawing from materials created by the Education Alliance at Brown University, [http://www.alliance.brown.edu/tdl/index.shtml](http://www.alliance.brown.edu/tdl/index.shtml)). Over six class meetings, participants engaged in discussion and activities centered on culturally and linguistically responsive teaching theories and practices. They considered the ways in which schools do and do not explicitly attend to issues of culture and language and why they should in their own teaching.

Participants were then invited to build upon this foundational knowledge of culture and culturally responsive teaching and attend explicitly to issues of race by considering both definitions and implications of the counter-narrative. Whole-class conversation centered on the following guiding questions:
1. What is the dominant narrative of contemporary youth of color? Who constructed it? Where do we see it being sanctioned? Where do we see it being questioned?

2. What strengths reside in the process of storytelling? What elements limit the process of storytelling?

3. What is a counter-narrative or counter-story? Who constructs it and why? How do we see this in literature and life? What benefits and challenges result in the creation and contemplation of a counter-narrative?

4. What implications do these stories (both dominant and counter) have for us as classroom teachers? As English language arts educators? As teacher leaders?

Candidates were then asked to demonstrate their knowledge of and ability to implement culturally responsive teaching by working in small groups to create and present three days of lessons (pre-reading, during reading, and post-reading) centered on one of the two counter-narrative titles. After engaging in the process of reading, discussing, and designing and presenting curriculum, all preservice teachers were asked to respond individually in writing to the following open-ended prompts for each of the texts:

- This book made me feel . . .
- This book made me question . . .
- This book made me believe . . .

Participants wrote independently outside of the classroom setting and had one week to complete and submit each set of prompts.

Data Sources and Analysis

Data sources for the study included the individual written reflections generated by preservice teachers in response to each novel following participation in the three classroom lessons presented by their peers. Because classroom instruction prior to reading and responding to the counter-narrative texts centered on culturally responsive teaching practices, including the implementation of these practices in the lesson development and sharing process, participants’ attention to culture was likely heightened during their encounters with the texts. While difficult to parse out the influences of the explicit instruction and teaching experience versus the texts themselves, every effort
was made to center findings on personal response to the stories rather than activities created or lived during the lesson sharing.

Using a grounded theory approach (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), data were read repeatedly with attention to moments when issues or tensions centered on race growing from engagement with the counter-narrative texts were evidenced. Selected passages were those that revealed personal reflection on issues of race rather than critical literary analysis of either text. For example, when a participant wrote, “Many adolescents question themselves as independent people versus being a component of their parents and families. Danny had the added question of identity due to the split of being his mother’s son attending a rich White private school and his father’s son from a Mexican community,” the passage was noted as raising questions of race but not included in the data to be analyzed given the emphasis on the text itself rather than the personal response it inspired.

The process of reading the data multiple times resulted in the identification of recurring patterns defined by repeated responses across multiple participants to the novels that were eventually selected as open codes. Initial patterns centered on ways in which race was referenced repeatedly in terms of connection, outsider status, justification of stereotypes, surprises, and feeling white. Data were then read and reread multiple times to refine, combine, and eliminate open codes in the creation of axial codes. For example, the open codes for “connection” and “outsider” were combined to reflect how these represent differing degrees of belonging rather than two unique concepts; similarly, data grouped under the code “justification of stereotypes” were interesting but not aligned with the research question and were subsequently eliminated from the analysis. Coded data were then organized into three remaining categories (cultural [dis]connections, challenges to assumptions and understandings, and considerations of Whiteness) that guide the presentation of findings below.

Findings

Cultural (Dis)Connections

Participants described repeatedly the ways in which the counter-narrative texts encouraged consideration of unfamiliar culture. For most participants, this gave rise to expression of connection across cultures, resulting particularly from the universality of the human condition and the empathetic power of literature.

Several participants drew on the universality of the human condition to argue for the existence of common ground across cultures. Universality in
this context suggests not the same lived realities among people everywhere but intimates instead the shared elements of existence that draw us together as a human species—surviving, finding joy and purpose, growing up, growing old, etc. While we might experience different day-to-day realities given the influence of class, race, geography, etc., we share some commonalities across time and place. In response to *After Tupac and D Foster*, for example, Kristen explained,

This book made me feel like I shared in the culture of the narrator and Nikka. Even though I am a 21-year-old white girl living in middle/upper-middle class Connecticut, I could easily connect with the 12-year-old black girls from Queens. Woodson portrays them not just as black girls, but as girls that also happen to be black.

Kristen described how the childhood experiences described in the novel, while grounded in a culture different from her own, felt familiar—“hanging out on my street with the girls from my neighborhood, dealing with my friend’s older brother when he came over to talk to us, sleepovers, and playing our version of Double Dutch, what we called Mother May I.” “It’s not the names or the games that actually define a person,” she argued. “Names and pastimes change depending on culture, but the deeper connection—just being a kid who loves to play with friends—is universal.” She cited a particular example in the novel that intimates her full immersion into the culture Woodson describes:

I immediately felt as though I belonged with the narrator and Nikka, so much so that when they accuse D Foster of wearing “white girl shoes,” I was right there with them. The inner child in me, the one who didn’t know enough not to judge people by whether or not they looked like I did, sided with the narrator and Nikka. *Who does she think she is? Come on, who wears white girl shoes?* But then I thought to myself, *Oh, yes, I wear white girl shoes.*

Other participants described how the counter-narrative texts fostered connection across cultures by exposing them to the universal experience of individual identity formation; regardless of background, time, or place, they argued, humans engage in the process of figuring out who they are and who they want to be in the process of maturation. In response to *Mexican WhiteBoy*, Mary Ann described how Danny’s attempts to navigate this process drew her into the story: “I immediately identified with Danny [the protagonist] even though I’m not Mexican American and I don’t love baseball as much as he did.” She identified his “struggles to fit in and discover his identity” as factors that make him a “likeable and relatable character.”
She extended this analysis to life beyond the fictional text, considering how identity formation is an inherent part of the growing up process, regardless of one’s race, ethnicity, or culture, and how a multiplicity of identities can exist within any one individual:

I think we all struggle with our different identities whether it’s being a girl and an athlete, a student and a daughter, someone’s girlfriend and someone’s babysitter. It can be hard to juggle them all and sometimes we feel like we have to show a preference to one over the other. This book really made me think about how we can be two things at once whether it’s white and Mexican, a girly girl and a tomboy, etc.

Melanie, too, expressed her belief that the counter-narrative reflected some element of the universal in the way characters grapple with their identities. She wrote, “I know that the characters in After Tupac and D Foster are very similar to myself, even though the color of my skin and the neighborhood I grew up in are completely different.” To demonstrate this connection, she cited a scene from the novel in which the narrator feels lost and confused about who she is:

Lately I’d been feeling like I was standing outside watching everything and everybody. Wish I could take the part of me that was over there and the part of me that was over here and push them together—make myself into one whole person like everybody else (Woodson, 2008, p. 37). In response, Melanie mused, “That feeling of being in two places at once, a million different identities and emotions all at the same time, that’s what we’re all going through, whether old or young, black or white, gay or straight, whatever.” In each of these examples, counter-narrative literature allowed participants to connect with those whose realities are unfamiliar to them by drawing on the universality of the human condition.

Recognition and celebration of this universality, however, also resulted in the occasional annulment of race, or intimation that race doesn’t really matter. Daria, for instance, noted,

The parts [of Mexican WhiteBoy] that dealt about race were something that I didn’t connect to as much. And I didn’t find them to factor into my reading of the novel as much until we discussed it in class. I wasn’t drawn to race as much as the universal story of young adults coming to the realization about their parents and the relationships that they have with their families.

While Daria found her way into the story through the universal elements it includes, the focus on the universal left her unaware of how race influenced the cultural norms that shaped the lives of the characters.
Several participants experienced and expressed the empathetic power of literature in the counter-narrative texts as means to connect across cultures. For some, this took the form of a more generalized sense of “I now know what this feels like.” Amy, for example, saw herself imagining Danny’s reality across the story:

I felt what it is like to be both Mexican and white, with a father who left my family and a mother who is more interested in her new rich boyfriend than her kids. I felt stuck, because I don’t fit in at the predominantly white, upper-class private school, and I can’t fit in with my dad’s family and the life that I want to have. I felt the pain that a person with this double consciousness doesn’t normally show or talk about.

She allowed herself to imagine Danny’s existence from his perspective—at home, in school, in life.

Several participants imagined for themselves the linguistic conflict infused throughout this novel. Danny is raised by his white, monolingual English-speaking mother; when he spends time with his Spanish-speaking relatives, he finds himself unable to communicate fully. As monolingual English speakers, participants readily imagined the difficulty of Danny’s reality, empathizing with his struggle to fit in. Jade noted how the novel made her “feel empathetic toward anyone who has ever felt uncomfortable or out of place because of their ethnicity or language.” She imagined how “Danny struggles with feeling like an outcast” and how “the language barrier is extremely difficult to him because he feels embarrassed that he does not know what his Spanish family is talking about, and he knows they can sense him ‘faking it’ when he laughs at their jokes.” Kaitlyn described this outsider existence as she felt it while reading the novel. “As a reader you honestly felt as if you were excluded from all the family activities, like you were an outsider trying to pry your way in,” she explained. “The book really emphasized how difficult it could be to fit into a different culture than you’re familiar with, and ultimately made me feel and recognize the frustration that comes from being different than the crowd.” Kathie talked explicitly about her own linguistic deficiencies and how the author intentionally placed her outside the inner circle to help her experience Danny’s frustration:

Though I could still understand the context of the story, I could not help but desire to understand the words that I could not understand. I was able to better empathize with Danny. When Liberty shouts to Danny, “Espera” (243), I cannot help but to crave a translation, an understanding, an insider’s perspective. My reader’s experience as an outsider made me question language and its power to create an insider/outsider barrier between people.
These examples reveal how the counter-narrative texts helped participants imagine alternative realities that extend beyond their experiences and empathize with characters whose fictional lives are different from their own, thus suggesting the transcendent power of literature to encourage readers to hold and learn from another’s story.

One participant, however, struggled to empathize across cultures, citing irreconcilable differences. In her thinking about *After Tupac and D Foster*, Mary Ann expressed a heightened sense of frustration that reflected her difficulty in accepting alternate ways of knowing and doing beyond her personal experiences. Mary Ann had a more difficult time identifying with this novel than she did with *Mexican WhiteBoy*. In her estimation, “*Mexican Whiteboy* could be the story of anyone longing to fit into two seemingly different worlds and reconciling different parts of their identity.” *After Tupac and D Foster*, however, “was nothing like that. It was more about how people in our lives create lasting impressions on us and help us define who we are.” Mary Ann’s primary frustration toward the novel resided in the fact that Woodson draws on Tupac as the sustaining influence in the girls’ lives. “Had the story just been about D Foster and not about Tupac at all,” she explained, “I think I would have identified with it more. I had a really hard time wrapping my mind around the idea that a controversial rapper who calls himself a ‘thug’ could mean so much to a 12-year-old girl.” Mary Ann’s inability to connect with the text seemed to stem not from the fact that people are influenced by others but by whom, in particular, the girls in the novel are influenced. Tupac doesn’t embody or reflect the traits or characteristics Mary Ann values in her culture, and she subsequently cannot relate. In this case, the normalization of one culture prohibits empathy across cultures.

**Challenges to Assumptions and Understandings**

Participants described repeatedly the ways in which the counter-narrative texts encouraged their reconsideration of unfamiliar cultures. This occurred on two levels as participants questioned existing stereotypes of people of color and, more significantly, recognized their own culpability in the perpetuation of these stereotypes.

Relative to the first level, several participants described how the counter-narrative texts challenge existing, broadly held assumptions about people of color in American society. Mary Ann argued that reading and reflecting on *After Tupac and D Foster* made her “question what it means to be a young black person and how the characters challenged or lived up to the social expectations that we place on them.” She cited several examples
of how characters in the novel both defy and reinforce stereotypes she sees as prevalent in society today:

    JayJones wasn’t expected to go to college because he was black. But then he made it to college only by playing basketball. Young black women like Neeka and the narrator are expected to get pregnant, drop out of high school, and never go to college. The narrator defies this stereotype by being very smart and eventually going to college. Even Neeka’s family and the narrator’s mom defy the stereotype: the novel makes no mention of them being crack fiends or on welfare.

    Another participant, Carissa, was surprised by the knowledge and emotional depth conveyed by the teen protagonists in After Tupac and D Foster, particularly given the “surface-level things, like boys and parties and food and jumping rope,” that she expected to comprise their interests. These young women, she explained, “were extremely deep and insightful—I’d say they were beyond their years—especially in the way they could understand the words of their favorite musicians, the strict rules of their parents, and the maturity it takes them to realize the ignorance of homophobia.”

    Two participants commented explicitly on the often-perpetuated association between Latino/Latina culture and violence, noting how the counter-narrative in Mexican WhiteBoy provided an alternative story as embodied in the character of Danny. Melanie contrasted the stereotype of Latinos/Latinas that she believes exists (“People of color are often seen as being really tough.”) with how Danny is portrayed in the novel (“Danny is very sensitive and introverted, not like how we would typically envision his character as a Mexican.”). She questioned how this break in perception might transfer to the nonfictional world in which we live, noting, “This made me wonder how many people out there actually suffer from this double consciousness and can’t find the confidence or security that comes from having a strong sense of identity. Not everyone who considers themselves Mexican is that tough, that strong, that proud, in a way that we expect them to be.” Similarly, Kami recognized the significant amount of violence in the novel and questioned whether that serves to undermine or reinforce the stereotype of the dangerous Latino/Latina. In grappling with this question, she asked herself, “Was the violence placed in the novel because it is a stereotypical idea of Mexicans? Or was de la Peña using it to distance Danny from the violent part of his family and realize his own values?”

    Each of the above examples reveals the way in which the counter-narrative texts heightened participants’ awareness of the assumptions about people of color that are perpetuated in American society. However,
the counter-narratives did not necessarily help these readers consider the accuracy of the dominant narrative in light of an alternate, albeit fictional, version of how things really are or can be. Across examples, lingering deficit perspectives associated with people of color were evidenced; participants were well aware of the dominant narrative and regularly grounded their vision of the Black and/or Latino/Latina experience in what this narrative forwards, thus suggesting the pervasive influence of the dominant narrative. Mary Ann expressed gratitude that *After Tupac and D Foster* features young black women who do not get pregnant, drop out of high school, and live in communities where family members are welfare-dependent crack fiends. Carissa recognized how these same young women defy a stereotype but did not call into question the stereotype itself. Similarly, Melanie and Kami recognized the potential effect of the counter-narrative in the text, particularly in terms of Danny’s nonviolent portrayal, but did not extend their questioning to implicate the dominant narrative (or their role in maintaining it) as problematic. These participants identified the characters as fictional outliers resulting from a counter-narrative depiction. They served as interesting exceptions to the norm placed in the story to pose questions centered on existing assumptions of people of color but were not identified as challenging to participants’ own perceptions of race.

Some participants, however, not only questioned existing stereotypes of people of color but recognized their own biases and culpability in the perpetuation of these stereotypes. As Justina noted, “the novel had me question how I had characterized others based on small facts/details I had acquired about them.” Marian extended this argument when she explained,

> When I reflect on my reading of the story, I realize that I never questioned the culture that Matt de la Peña depicts of the Mexican youths. I didn’t question it because it was the depiction that I have read and watched and listened to over and over again. These Mexican youths played sports, they engaged in jokingly degrading dialogue, they had the close-knit extended family units. These are all narratives that I have experienced about colored youths in almost all depictions I have encountered.

Patrick’s response is similar in the way it captures the moment of awareness that revealed the ways in which our assumptions of race are tacit and often unquestioned: “I described *Mexican Whiteboy* as ‘authentic’ when I mentioned it to a hopeful reader. It wasn’t until I wrote this paper that I began to think how its ‘authenticity’ could just as easily be playing off of some superficial perception I had created to group the rich white communities and poor Hispanic communities.” As evidenced in both of these
examples, the counter-narrative gave rise to awareness and questioning of the dominant narrative.

In the process of reading and reflecting on the counter-narrative texts, it was as though some participants caught themselves in the act of accepting the dominant narrative and experienced surprise, even embarrassment, by their lack of critical awareness. Kaitlyn provides evidence of this when she referenced a particular moment in After Tupac and D Foster that took her by surprise, given her assumptions of race and culture: “Although I hate to admit it, I was secretly shocked when D. Foster’s mother turned out to be white, although I really had no reason for believing she was a particular race throughout the book.”

Marian named her own “hypocrisy” when she considered how the success of a person of color is often assumed to result from that person having to “work harder or catching a break along the way.” She first indicated that “this doesn’t seem right at all” but admitted that her response to the success of the primary characters in Mexican WhiteBoy resulted from these “exceptions.” “At the end of the book, I felt happy that they all ended up succeeding,” she noted. “But when I contemplate my reaction, I realize that I am happy because they overcame something, not just because they succeeded. I unconsciously fed into the idea that they had to leave that place where the Mexicans don’t ever succeed and go to that other place where people can escape their fate.”

Serena, the single participant who self-identifies as Black, expressed similar frustration when she described how she imagined Danny’s friend Uno, from Mexican WhiteBoy, given his Black/Latino identity. She admitted, “This book made me feel surprised and honestly somewhat ashamed because of that feeling of surprise.” She explained how she assumed Danny and Uno could never be friends, much less “brothers,” given the “rivalry and competition” she imagined would define Uno’s character. “I’m ashamed and abashed to say that I couldn’t foresee a friendship but rather assumed animosity,” she wrote. “I think I immediately, from the first punch Uno threw, imposed my ideas that I’ve seen and learned about people from the ‘hood’ and how seemingly impossible it can be to reestablish peace, let alone brotherhood. I truly mentally judged Uno as the bad guy, the ‘hood,’ incapable of change or moving beyond his station.” Serena noted the implications of her described misjudgment, extending her concerns to the ways in which she judges others in life beyond the page:

Because of my mistake, I honestly have to take a step back and reassess my own ability to judge, my own morals on what I see and supposedly know. I have to question these things that I once not necessarily thought as true,
but that have somehow clouded my judgment. I have to ask myself, by imposing these crude judgments on Uno, am I any better than the ‘bad guy’ I pictured him as? How clouded have I become if I can judge and judge so wrongly?

These examples intimate not only the ways in which reflection on counter-narrative texts gave rise to the recognition of personal biases in matters of race but also the intensity of emotion that counter-narrative texts can inspire in such reflections.

Considerations of Whiteness

Participants described repeatedly the ways in which the counter-narrative texts encouraged consideration of their own Whiteness. For some participants, this awareness resulted from the outsider or insider status they felt they were granted given their racial and cultural identities and the fact that these racial and cultural identities differed from those represented in the novels. Kristen’s claims in response to Mexican WhiteBoy encapsulated well the inward reflection that resulted from the outsider perspective:

This book made me feel extremely white. I do not speak Spanish and have little experience with the Spanish language. My hometown is predominantly Italian and Irish, and I don’t have personal connections with anyone who is Latino/Latina—in fact, the most exposure I’ve had to Latino culture is my half-Indonesian friend who studied abroad in Mexico two years ago.

The shared culture described in the counter-narrative highlighted for Kristen one significant way in which she is different. Another participant, Daria, recognized her insider status resulting from her Whiteness. As a result of reading and reflecting on the two counter-narrative examples, she critiqued the predominance of the dominant narrative as the primary (and narrow) lens through which she hears stories. She argued that exposure to counter-narrative texts made her “question how people who are different races actually feel. What is their narrative? What do they want to say?” Access to alternative stories afforded recognition of a limitation of her insider status.

Other participants, in the consideration of their own Whiteness, created racial dichotomies in response to the counter-narrative authors’ portrayals of race. Relative to Mexican WhiteBoy, for example, multiple participants described the ways in which whites and Mexicans are portrayed as disparate entities, often oppositional in nature. Patrick described this distinction as follows: “The white characters in the novel are constantly being described as ignorant to their privileges and racist. All the Hispanic characters in the
novel are described as poor and looking for a way out of the life they have. The only character that is perceived otherwise is Danny and that is because he is half-white.” Mary Ann shared this analysis, writing, “It seems that everyone in Danny’s community in National City identify themselves as Mexican. And they are proud of it. They don’t even say Mexican American. They just say ‘Yo, I’m Mexican.”’ For both Patrick and Mary Ann, these distinctions led to discomfort. Patrick noted that the book made him “feel dirty for being a white male,” and Mary Ann argued that the novel made her “uncomfortable while reading, because it created the issue of ‘us vs. them.’”

One participant, Kristen, identified some of these same initial concerns, writing,

The dichotomy presented in the novel (Mexican vs. white) seems, at first glance, to enforce stereotypes. With two specific and entirely different races, it seems only logical that each race would have its own, very distinct, defining characteristics, and the characteristics of the races in the book are, in fact, stereotypical. White people are rich. White people don’t understand minority cultures. White people are cocky. Latinos are good at baseball (I inevitably think of the Yankees: Jorge Posada, Mariano Rivera, Alex Rodriguez). Minorities are poor. Latinas are sassy. Minorities wear Timberlands, chains, and have tattoos. As readers, we see all of these represented in Mexican Whiteboy. Although I’m not rich or cocky, and although I try to learn about other cultures whenever I possibly can, the fact that I do not match any of the minority stereotypes left me feeling only one thing: white.

However, this awareness of Whiteness inspired in Kristen an explicit decision to reflect more on her racial identity. “I decided to further examine why I was feeling so white,” she wrote. “I realized it is because I am. Being white is part of my racial identity, just as being half-white and half-Mexican is part of Danny’s.” Kristen considered how race defines one element of her identity, an essential part, but a part nevertheless. She used the text as impetus for this recognition, as evidence by her reasoning below:

Danny is good at baseball not because he is half-Mexican, but because he is simply good at baseball. Uno is poor not because he is half-black, but because his step-dad and mother are not financially well-off. Mexican Whiteboy offers a successful counter-narrative because it presents stereotypes as characteristics of individuals, not an entire race. This forces the reader to examine how a general stereotype can be made unique to an individual, and thus is no longer a stereotype. It becomes a mark of identity, and not an identity of an entire race, but of an individual.

In this case, the counter-narrative encouraged Kristen to think about her
Whiteness explicitly, thus making this element of her identity more transparent.

**Discussion**

Findings suggest that considerations of race arising from engagement with counter-narrative texts are emotional, sometimes shameful, sometimes empowering, and often driven by a desire to connect, to identify ways in which we, as members of the human condition, are similar. Delgado (2000) argues that counter-narrative texts can expose candidates to unfamiliar cultures and voices of color that move them beyond the cultural settings in which they have the most lived experiences—essential given that preservice teachers hold personal perspectives on what race means, perspectives constructed primarily through their often-limited life experiences (Marx, 2004; Sleeter, 1993). In this study, participants attended to some element of the familiar in response to such exposure, seeking what they knew in examination of a setting that they did not. Candidates described repeatedly how they could relate to the diverse protagonists in the novels due to some shared element of existence, including “just being a kid who loves to play with friends” and the universal process of finding one’s identity in the midst of the “struggle to fit in.” Candidates found this connection through their ability to empathize with the characters they met on the page based on the similarities they possess. As monolingual English speakers, for example, they understood Danny’s frustration in a predominantly Spanish-speaking setting.

However, while this emphasis on the similar led candidates into the text and encouraged them to find themselves in the realities of others, singular attention to the universal condition can limit understandings of the individual, particularly the ways in which race influences how every person sees and is seen. Given the power of literature to create empathetic connection, the counter-narrative has the potential to promote overly simplified understandings of race. When Daria noted that race was not a factor in her reading of *Mexican WhiteBoy*, she defended her stance by arguing that race was not necessary in her understanding or appreciation of the story; the universal connection was enough. Her response suggests the potential danger that can emerge when race is not attended to explicitly. Teacher candidates’ “continued exhortations that ‘I just see people’ (Berry, 1995) serve to reinforce the theorized invisibility of race and racism, thereby limiting one’s ability to interrogate notions of privilege and its corollary, the deprivileging of minoritized social groups” (Solomon et al., 2005, p. 150), and affirming the assumption that Whiteness is the norm (McLaren, 2005). Perhaps reluctance...
on the part of participants to identify difference grew from fear, particularly among white candidates who may resist identifying color out of concerns of being discriminatory (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Schofield, 1997). This stance can be problematic when applied to a classroom context in which color-blind thinking can lead to behaviors that violate educational and humanitarian principles of equity (Solomon et al., 2005, p. 150).

Connection is comfortable, and the identification of commonalities across culture helps us feel united. Difference, however, holds the potential for dissension. As evidenced in the findings, when suggestions of difference arose in response to consideration of the counter-narrative texts, candidates tended to express some level of discomfort. Mary Ann’s heightened frustration in response to *After Tupac and D Foster*, for example, resulted from her inability to connect with the text due to differing perspectives on Tupac as a role model. She could not understand how a culture might value a man who, from her perspective, is a criminal.

Discomfort with difference arose, too, among participants who considered explicitly their own racial identities in contrast to those highlighted in the counter-narrative texts. Such discussions of race tended to center on the ways in which cultural differences can create barriers that serve to separate rather than bring people together, thus creating outsiders and insiders. Participants spoke of the frustration they felt in response to this dichotomy, feeling “dirty for being a white male” rather than a Latino and feeling “uncomfortable while reading, because [the novel] created the issue of ‘us versus them.’” As evidenced by their willingness to share such honest responses, engagement with counter-narrative texts did indeed provide candidates safe space in which to explore race, space that allowed for disagreement, dissension, and a critique of the counter-narratives and the ideas they raise (Brooks, 2009; Glenn, 2008; Williams, 2004).

However, while the above comments evidence the ways in which counter-narrative texts can inspire reflection on race, they also remind us that learning about race involves more than “engaging in oppositional subjectivities that pit one group against the others” (Solomon et al., 2005, p. 163). To really understand race, one must accept and recognize that one’s assumptions are biased. Learning about race involves “developing an understanding of the importance of understanding the ways in which their understanding of what it means to be Black, Chinese, South-Asian, are categories that are replete with assumptions and that these assumptions impact on their interactions with these students” (Solomon et al., 2005, p. 163).
In their engagement with the counter-narrative texts, several participants described the ways in which the counter-narrative texts encouraged their reconsideration of unfamiliar cultures. Yet, although some participants indicated a clear awareness of how the counter-narrative called into question existing stereotypes by portraying characters in unexpected ways (Danny, a Latino, was not as violent as his uncles; Neeka, a Black teen, and her friends were interested in activities beyond jump roping on the sidewalk outside the front stoop), they did not identify the counter-narrative as a challenge to their own understandings of race. For these candidates, the counter-narratives succeeded in disrupting the existing discourses that marginalize people of color through negative, deficit-oriented perspectives (Lopez, 2003), revealed the ways in which “dominant perspectives distort the realities of the other” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, pp. 262–263), and served as an analytic tool to counter dominant perspectives (Milner, 2008), all valuable in their own right.

For others, however, the counter-narratives were more than an analytic tool and inspired more emotional, personally grounded responses to the texts and the issues of race they call forth. The texts engaged some candidates in thinking around their own culpability in supporting the dominant narrative and perpetuating the stereotypes they identified and critiqued in the novel. These participants noted the ways in which their understandings of race are influenced (and limited) by their experiences and how thinking carefully about the counter-narratives inspired questioning about these held depictions, their origins and their accuracy. The counter-narratives allowed these candidates to “challenge the ‘majoritarian’ stories which make White privilege appear natural” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26) by realizing (and accepting) their own privilege and the ways in which it had been ignored. With such honest questioning comes the potential for strong emotions, as evidenced in the comments of several participants who indicated surprise, embarrassment, and shame at the revelation of their own biases. These reactions suggest that the counter-narratives affected the oppressor by catalyzing “cognitive conflict to jar White dysconscious racism” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 14). This dissonance encouraged candidates to reflect not only on their personal constructions of race but how these constructions influence their lives and the lives of others (Bernal, 2002). Recognition of our own hypocrisy, however uncomfortable it may be, is a necessary precursor to intellectual and emotional growth, as well as reasoned and aware acceptance of our own racial identities and what they carry.

As seen in the work of Buehler, Gere, Dallavis, and Haviland, (2009), Chubbuck (2004), Hill-Jackson (2007), Laughter (2010), the process of white preservice teachers building complex understandings of race is fraught with
struggle and uncertainty, forward momentum and backward slides; the process is highly individualized and depends heavily on candidate knowledge, experiences, and dispositions. Conducting this study revealed, too, that the process depends also on the knowledge, experiences, and dispositions of the instructor. It is important to note that, in the process of analyzing these data, I identified personal biases that resulted from my position as a white researcher. I conceptualized, for example, a dichotomous relationship between whites and people of color, grouping people of color in an overly simplistic way that failed to realize the multiple lines of difference that exist between and among groups. It took the comments of Serena, the single participant who self-identifies as Black, to remind me that we all (not just whites) might benefit from exposure to literature that describes races and cultures unfamiliar to us as readers and people. Serena noted how *Mexican WhiteBoy*, in particular, challenged her assumption of Latinos/Latinas and encouraged her to reflect carefully, as evidenced by her claim, “I honestly have to take a step back and reassess my own ability to judge, my own morals on what I see and supposedly know.” This aligns well with the work of Gomez and White (2010) whose study described how prospective teachers, regardless of race, tended to define those outside their race as “other,” people who “fundamentally differed from them, and about whom they had many preconceived notions” (p. 1016). As noted by Gere et al. (2009), teacher educators committed to preparing culturally responsive teachers must attend carefully to both student and instructor positionings and consider how the raced consciousness among all involved in the preparation endeavor influences the process and outcome.

**Conclusion and Implications**

This study reveals the ways in which reading and reflecting on two counter-narrative texts fostered opportunities for participants to think more acutely about their understandings of race within and beyond the text. Across all candidates in this study, engagement with counter-narrative texts inspired consideration of race, thus suggesting the potential for use of such texts in the training of teachers preparing to enter the richly diverse classrooms that define today’s schools. Participants expressed feelings of empathy with and connection to characters whose cultural realities are different from their own. This emphasis on the universal human condition and transcendent power of literature suggests the potential of counter-narrative literature to allow participants to connect with characters across lines of difference. In addition, participants provided evidence of how the counter-narratives
encouraged them to reconsider assumptions that society and they hold and perpetuate relative to people of color. The texts offered readers a new way in which to re-conceptualize societal norms to reconsider how they see the seeming “other” and, in some cases, recognize their own culpability in promoting existing stereotypes. Finally, the counter-narrative texts heightened participants’ awareness of whiteness, the ways in which race can privilege or limit by fostering insider or outsider status, and the discomfort that can result when such dichotomies define our identities.

Additionally, these findings confirm and illuminate further the complexities inherent in the development of understandings of race among preservice teachers and reveal a richer understanding of preservice teachers’ development of knowledge related to the educational needs of students of color and their attitudes toward these students in and out of the classroom (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Villegas & Lucas, 2002, 2007). Although participants expressed increased engagement with issues of race in response to the counter-narrative texts, some data suggest the persistent presence of deficit-oriented beliefs. This finding supports the work of Lazar and Offenberg (2011) whose study suggests that teaching in critically transformative ways requires training that strengthens preservice teacher understandings of the complexity of race, particularly institutional and structural racism that (un)knowingly influences their perceptions of and responses to power and privilege and, I would add, might hinder their willingness and ability to teach in culturally responsive ways. This potential disconnect suggests that more work needs to be done to examine how changed perceptions on behalf of preservice teachers in response to explicit discussions of race through literature translate into classroom practice. As Mosley (2010) suggests, white preservice teachers need to be prepared to not only transcend predictable ways of being white but to create and employ a framework for what it means to practice racial literacy in the classroom setting.

Findings in this study highlight, too, the complicated emotional responses elicited by explicit attention to race in the process of teacher preparation, as evidenced by data that reveal defensiveness, guilt, and anger on behalf of some participants in response to the counter-narrative texts. Mazzei (2008) argued that such attention to race among white preservice teachers, in particular, has the potential to create feelings of loss among students—loss of comfort when asked to visit school communities in which they are now minoritized, loss of privilege when they see the norming presence of Whiteness and how they are advantaged by it, and loss of identity when their unnoticed position of Whiteness is called into question—and that students are likely to choose silence to avoid risking this loss. This
study intimates the potential for literature to help students engage with such emotional complexity and speak up rather than shut down. Stories, as fictional forms, provide readers the necessary distance to hold unfamiliar places, people, and perspectives they might otherwise fear, negate, or reject. Counter-narrative literature has the added benefit of presenting stories that challenge the dominant narrative, thus exposing readers to alternate versions of what they think they know. And young adult literature, in the context of secondary English education teacher preparation, invites readers to more objectively experience a portrayal of the potential realities of students with whom they might work.

Understanding the influence of courses in teacher education that strive to provide learning spaces for preservice teachers toward culturally responsive pedagogy is an ongoing challenge. And yet, despite these challenges, “more opportunities need to be made available to think through [diversity-related] ideas that prospective teachers meet in school classrooms or university coursework. Preservice teachers need safe spaces with thoughtful and listening group leaders who can help them consider how their racial and cultural identities are implicated in curriculum planning and instruction” (Gomez, Black, & Allen, 2007, p. 2132). Exposure to and frank discussion of counter-narrative representations of youth of color in young adult literature offer the potential to create such spaces.

Notes
1. In this study, “people of color” refers to people who are not white; the phrase is meant to be inclusive, representing solidarity among those who have been historically marginalized by race. It serves as a preferable replacement of minority (which often implies a subordinate connotation) and non-white (which implies a deficit perspective).
2. In defining “race,” this study draws on Critical Race Theory and the conception of race as socially constructed and able to shift; we live in a racialized society, one defined by a subjective conception of race that influences how members see and make sense of themselves and others in that society (Brooks, 2006; Moller & Allen, 2000; Sutherland, 2005).
5. Participants throughout this study are identified by pseudonyms.

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**Wendy J. Glenn** is associate professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction in the Neag School of Education at the University of Connecticut, where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in the theories and methods of teaching literature, writing, and language. Dr. Glenn received the 2009 University Teaching Fellow award, the highest honor for teaching given at the university, and was named a Fulbright Scholar to Norway in 2009–2010. She is the former “Literature and Literary Analysis” section editor for the *Journal of Literacy Research* and past president of the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the National Council of Teachers of English (ALAN).